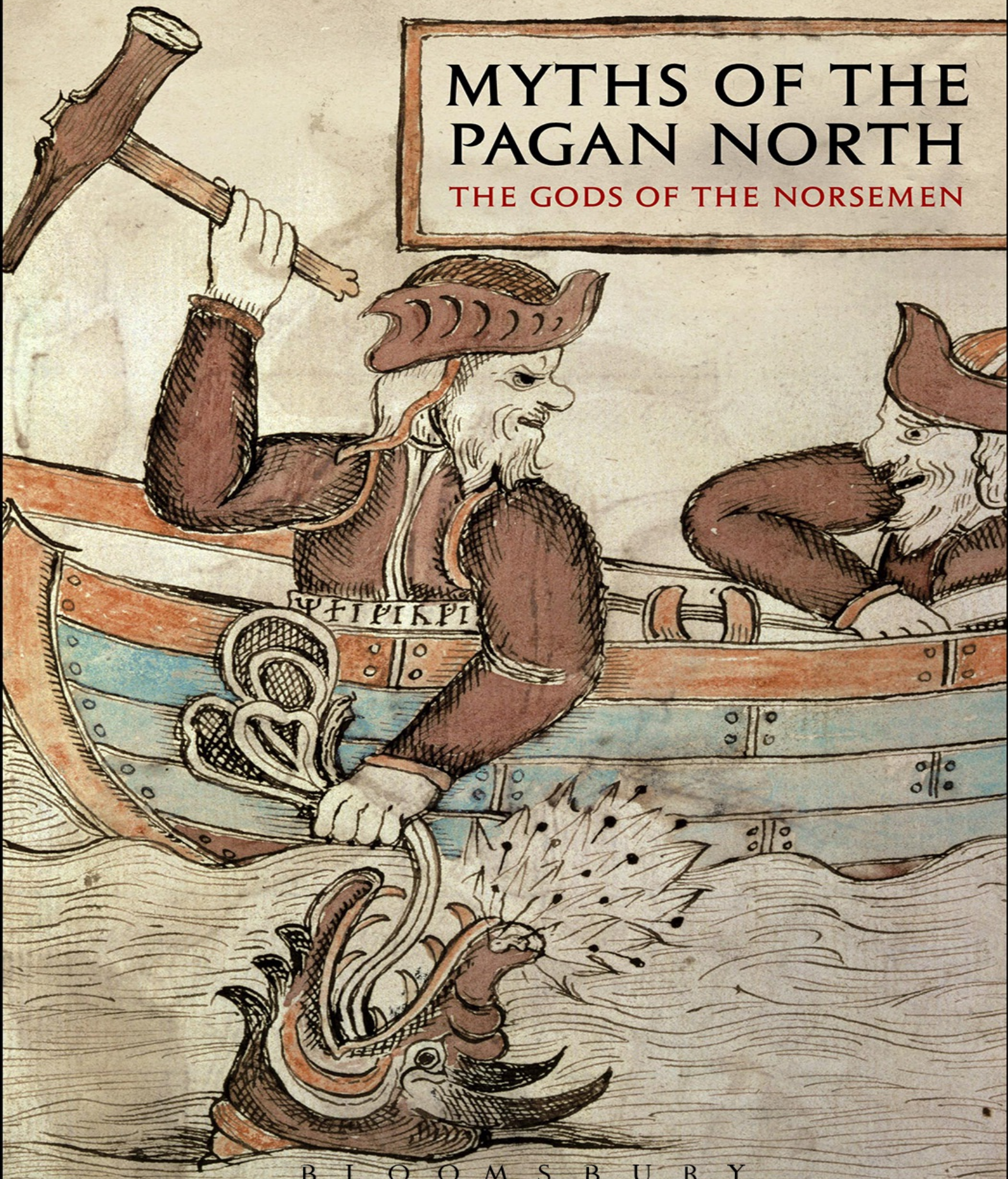
CHRISTOPHER ABRAM

MYTHS OF THE PAGAN NORTH

THE GODS OF THE NORSEMEN



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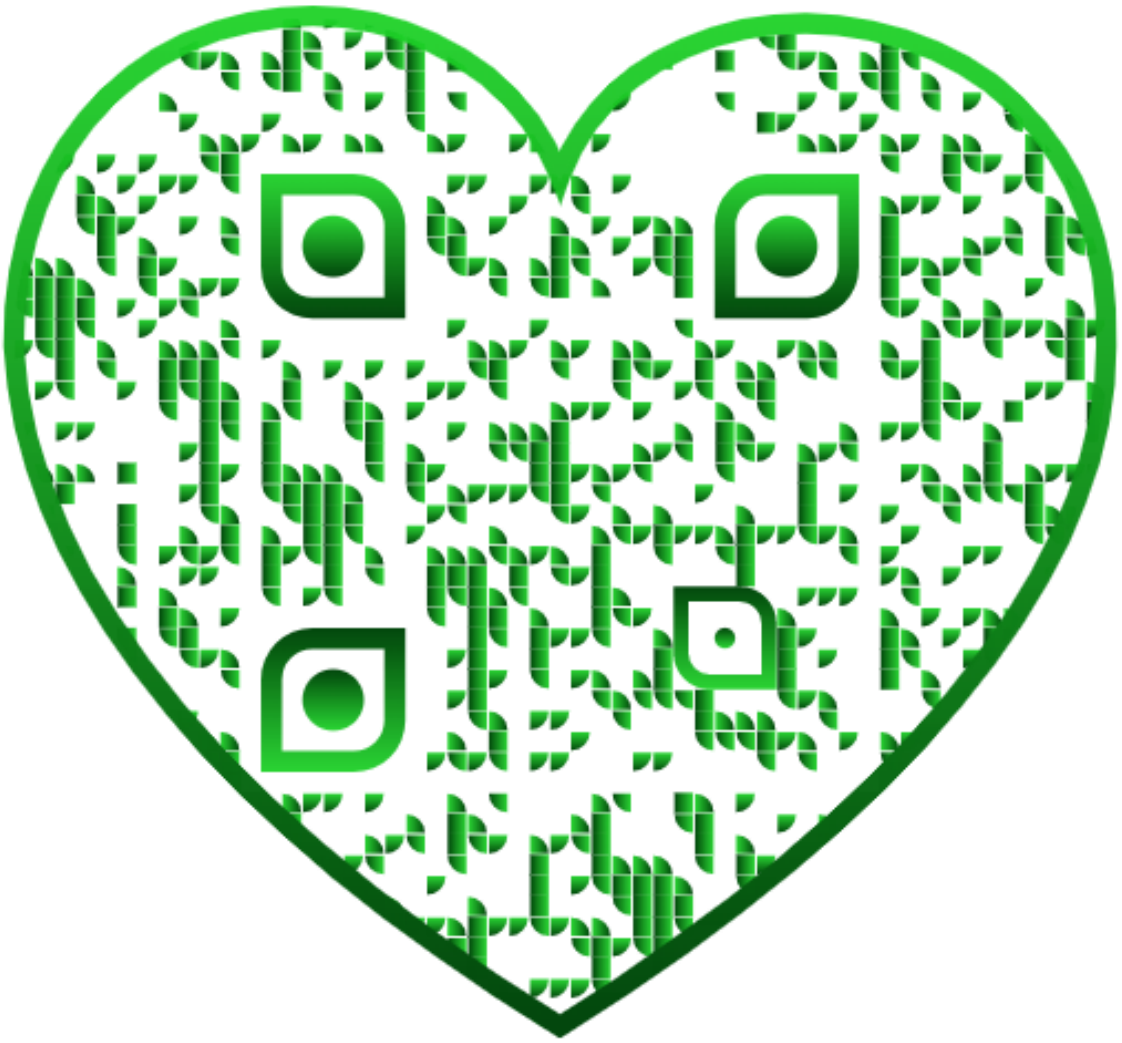

Myths of the Pagan North

The Gods of the Norsemen

Christopher Abram

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About this book

The Norse myths make up one of the world's great mythologies, and their popularity shows no sign of diminishing in the twenty-first century. The deeds and personalities of gods like Odin, Thor and Loki continue to fascinate readers and to inspire authors and artists in a wide range of genres and media. Many books about Norse mythology are already available – ranging from retellings of the myths to comprehensive descriptive handbooks to detailed, painstaking academic works. This book is designed to introduce the myths to a non-specialist readership in a new way, and to encourage people who are already familiar with the Norse myths to think about them differently.

Myths of the Pagan North is a history of myth-making in medieval Scandinavia. My aim is to establish as far as possible *when* people created these powerful stories about the pagan gods of the North; *why* they did so – what religious, social, or cultural impulses have shaped the myths; and *how* the myths came into being. I think it is important, if we are to understand these myths and what they meant to the people who made and used them, to understand the historical contexts that they come from. Accordingly, I concentrate on the actual forms of the myths that survive from the Middle Ages, and my analysis begins at the point where we start to find *recorded* versions of the myths – in the Viking Age, sometime around 850 AD. The period of myth-making in medieval Scandinavia was an age of enormous change and transformation in Nordic societies: it encompasses the development of the nation state, particularly in Denmark and Norway, and the migration abroad of huge numbers of Norse men and women, who colonized new territories around the whole of the North Sea region and came into contact with other cultures as far apart as Ireland and Russia. The most important change during the late Viking Age, however, was a religious one: this is the age of conversion to Christianity. The coming of Christianity to the

North did not, however, mean the end of pagan mythology, even though the Church tried its hardest to suppress the worship of the old gods. One of the main themes of this book is how the Norse myths were influenced by the threats or promises offered by the incoming religion, and how the myths survived the conversion to be told again by people who now identified themselves as Christians. It is remarkable not only that these pagan stories survived beyond the 'official' demise of paganism, but that the two most fertile periods for the creation of new versions of the Norse myths occurred in Norway during the conversion period and in Christian thirteenth-century Iceland. One of the most interesting challenges that studying the Norse myths presents is the necessity to take account of religious and cultural change and its effects upon texts that at first sight seem to represent a static pagan worldview.

The main theme of this book, then, is the way that myths change in time and space; how they evolve to meet the needs and desires of the people who make them. Its structure is roughly chronological. To begin with, we will examine the different types of sources that contain Norse myths or which may help us to understand their origins. The second chapter provides a brief overview of Scandinavian pagan religion, since mythology always has connections to people's beliefs, even if those connections are not always as straightforward as we might think. Then, we will trace the history of the myths themselves in the works of poets from the Viking Age through the era of conversion, and into the work of learned writers in the Christian period.

My book, therefore, is as much about myths *about* Norse paganism as it is about *pagan* myths – the myths produced by those people whom we can identify as pagans, who lived in a primarily pagan society and exhibited a pagan world-view. It is about how the Norse myths changed over time, as religion and society developed, and as paganism co-existed with and then gave way to Christianity. But it is also about how medieval Christian attitudes towards pagan religion have shaped 'pagan' myth. Norse mythology may deal with stories, themes, and subjects that are ancient, widespread, and eternal, but the Norse myths have never stood still. They form a dynamic network of belief and narrative, not a static monument to a lost civilization. Myth is eternal, but it never stops changing.

Although I try to introduce concepts, characters, and narratives fully and clearly when they first appear in this book, you might find one of the mythological dictionaries by John Lindow, Andy Orchard, or Rudolf Simek –

each of which is highly recommended – a useful companion to this book: they are listed in the bibliography. The best book to read about Norse mythology, however, now as it ever was, is *Snorra Edda*, the great thirteenth-century compendium of mythic narratives, poetry, and mythographic scholarship. It is available in a fine English translation by Anthony Faulkes, and ought to be the first port of call for anybody interested in the subject.

Wherever possible, I have referred to published translations of the Norse sources, so that readers can gain access to the texts relatively easily; not all translations are of equal quality, however, and I have silently altered readings here and there, particularly when the only available translation is too old to reflect up-to-date research on the text.

In an attempt to minimize confusion, I have used the original Old Norse forms of personal names and place-names throughout this book, even though they can be hard to pronounce (a simplified pronunciation guide follows). The only exceptions I have made are Odin (instead of Óðinn), Thor (instead of Þórr), and Valhalla (instead of Valhöll): these names are so well known in their English versions that I think it would confuse matters to attempt to reintroduce their original spellings.

I am grateful to the following publishers for permission to reproduce extracts from copyright works: Oxford University Press, for *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Carolyne Larrington (1996); University of Texas Press, for *Heimskringla*, translated by Lee M. Hollander (1964); and Orion, for Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes (1987).

I also wish to express my thanks to Michael Greenwood at Continuum, who commissioned this book and has been extremely supportive and patient throughout; to Emily Thornbury for her enthusiasm, encouragement and advice; and to Amy Mulligan, whose help in the final stages has been invaluable.

A Guide to Pronouncing Old Norse

It is impossible to know precisely how people in the Viking period and Middle Ages pronounced Old Norse, although it seems likely that it sounded somewhat similar to modern Icelandic, which provides the basis for this guide.

CONSONANTS – PRONOUNCED AS IN ENGLISH, WITH THE FOLLOWING EXCEPTIONS

ð ('eth')	Like English breathe; only occurs in medial and final positions (i.e. not at the beginnings of words)
f	Initial and double – like English far Between voiced sounds and final – like English very
g	Initial before back vowel – like English gate Initial before front vowel – hard g + 'y' sound Before s/t – like Scots loch Between voiced sounds / final – like English year
hv	Like English call
ll	Between vowels, before n/r, final –

	like English badly
p	Normally, like English happy Before k/s/t – a sort of ‘f’ sound
r	Rolled
þ (‘thorn’)	Like English think (initial only)

VOWELS

á	Like English now
e	Like English ‘e’, except in groups eng/enk/egj/egi, which are pronounced as if spelt ei-
é	Like English yes
í	Like English eat
ó	Like English roam
ú	Like French bouche
ý	Like English eat
æ/œ	Like English my
ø/o™ /ö	Like French peur
au	Like French œil
ei/ey	Like English bay

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Photo: Inmagine.com

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The Sources of Norse Mythology

Myth is often seen as a particularly stable form of story: a type of story that deals with universal themes and conforms to common patterns. According to many of the most influential theories of mythology, myth exists outside time and beyond place; it has characteristics that are innate and inevitable; in its essentials, it never changes. Myth is unchanging – so they say – because it is a primal form of storytelling: it wells up, spontaneously, from social, cultural or psychological drives that are common to all people. Myth-making is fundamental to human culture. And as people are fundamentally similar across the world and over time, so their myths are fundamentally the same.

These theories help to explain the origins of myth and account for the striking similarities between the myths produced by different cultures in different periods. But by concentrating so much upon cross-cultural similarities, this approach ignores – or even erases – differences between the myths of different cultures and variations between stories told within a culture. Most significantly, universalist approaches to mythology tend to disregard the fact that we have no access to the 'original', 'pure' form of a myth. Every myth that we read has been written or recorded in some other way: written, spoken, drawn or acted out by a particular person on a particular day, in a particular place, for a particular reason. In other words, what we talk about when we talk about a myth is often really a version of a myth, a retelling, a text. Every time a myth is given form, it moves from being abstract to being concrete, from being universal and timeless to being particular and time bound. Translating a mythic narrative into a different form will inevitably alter it; a myth that was originally transmitted in an oral tradition will not be the same once it has been written down, for example. Further change is possible when a text is copied, or when a narrative is re-

expressed through painting rather than script or print, or moves between prose and poetry. Of course, the individual changes may only be minor or insignificant: but they remind us that the sources we use in the study of mythology do not give us perfect ‘ur-myths’ from before the dawn of history. The hypothetical single, original ur-myth has often been the focus of mythographic studies. But this book does not aim to recover what the Norse myths were really like in their ‘purest’, ‘oldest’, or ‘most authentic’ form; it attempts to explain why they are like they actually *are*. Myths differ perceptibly between different sources, precisely because these sources are different.

In this chapter, therefore, I will describe the types of source material that provide us with evidence about the Norse myths and the people who made and used them before providing a case study of a myth that appears in many sources – Thor’s encounter with the world-serpent Miðgarðsormr. This story beautifully illustrates how a myth can both retain its identity across time and yet change significantly across its successive versions.

The sources for Norse myths can be categorized by their medium, their age and their literary or artistic characteristics. Individual myths are often better represented in some categories than in others. Because each category requires different methods of interpretation, understanding Norse mythology on the basis of an individual text or singular object is often extremely difficult. But I shall avoid speaking of ‘better’ sources or ‘worse’ sources, ‘reliable’ sources or ‘fabricated’ sources, ‘authentic’ sources or ‘ersatz’ sources. Such value-judgements depend on what one wants to get out of the material: a historian of religion who seeks in myth traces of pre-Christian ritual practice, for example, may give more weight to the evidence provided by older sources and those that have been least ‘contaminated’ by contact with Christian culture. Critics who prefer to treat myth as a particular mode of literary discourse, on the other hand, are likely to favour those versions of a myth that exist in fully developed textual narratives, regardless of their date or provenance. The answers that any of these sources give will naturally depend upon what questions are asked of them.

The different source categories are arranged roughly chronologically, beginning with the earliest types; they frequently overlap, however.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The study of material culture – the objects people have left behind – is undoubtedly of signal importance to the study of the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Archaeological evidence is particularly valuable for the pre-literate pagan period, from which no indigenous written sources survive. Most artefacts, however, have little relevance to the study of mythology: their purpose is not to tell stories; they are a medium only of non-narrative information. On the other hand, archaeology has an irreplaceable value for the study of pagan religion. Religious belief is an important part of the myths' cultural background. Accordingly, the religious context that archaeology can provide may help us to understand where the myths came from and how they related to other aspects of pagan culture; it cannot, however, give us first-hand evidence of the existence or form of the myths themselves in the period in question. There are two exceptions to this rule, however: some pictorial artefacts (notably picture stones) intersect with textual versions of mythic narratives, while a few inscriptions in runes – early Scandinavia's native script-system – bear upon myth, though usually in limited ways.

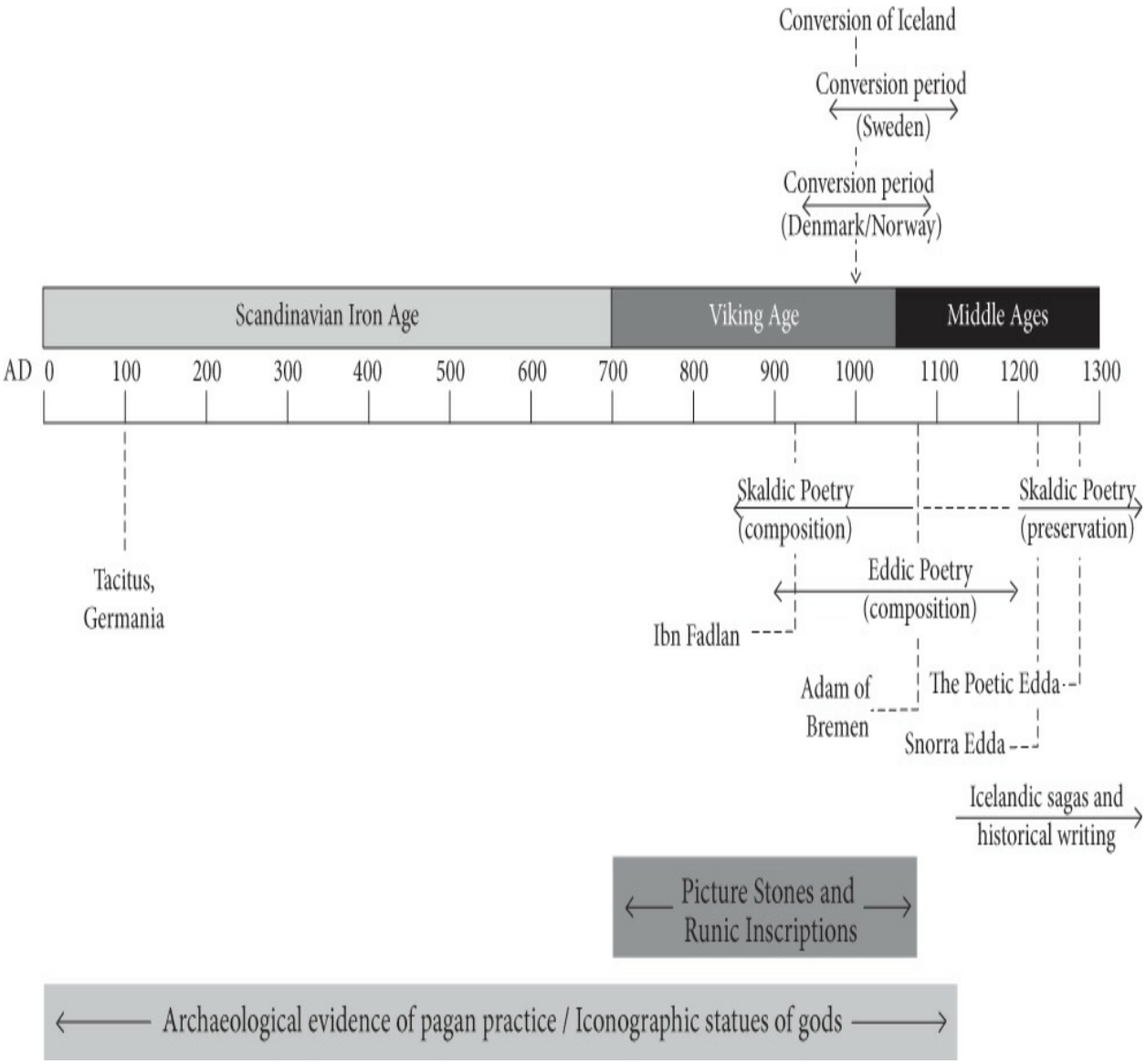

FIGURE 1 A chronological typology of different types of sources that give information about Norse pagan myth, culture and religion.

Archaeology seems to promise us unmediated access to the ancient past. Only the earth and the passage of time stand between us and the pagan inhabitants of Scandinavia; no meddling monks have intervened in it to distort our image of Norse culture with their censorship, bowdlerization, or Christian re-interpretations. Whatever the pagans left behind is what modern archaeologists find. Thus, archaeological evidence is often given a privileged status as a particularly authentic source of information about pagan society, culture and not least religion. At the same time, it is a difficult source to use,

particularly when studying myth. Even when the dating of an object is reasonably certain, and its context properly identified, artefacts of religious or potentially mythological significance can remain frustratingly silent about their identity, function and significance within a wider mythological–religious framework.

Two types of archaeological site are especially relevant to Norse paganism: temple or cultic sites and burials. Neither, however, tells us much about myths. A temple site might reveal traces of the rituals that were carried out there in the Viking Age, but it usually does so only unwillingly, and by reference to later written sources that claim to describe similar sorts of practices. We often can only identify a place of worship in archaeology by comparing it to written accounts of the culture's religion; and these literary accounts are all too often written in an entirely different time and place by an author who could have had no first-hand knowledge of pagan practices. Although – as we shall see – writers of all periods have made connections between religious beliefs, religious practices and the myths that they see as being the narrative expression of pagan religion, these relationships are almost always questionable. Myths may help people to explain or understand rituals, but archaeological evidence of rituals cannot be used to infer the existence of myths that may once have been connected to them.

Burial practices are at first glance a more hopeful source for pagan attitudes towards myth, since death is an important focus of most mythologies, and Norse tradition includes several fully developed myths about death, dying and a person's posthumous fate within a mythological afterlife. Burials are also common, and can often be dated with some certainty; it is at least almost always possible to ascribe an individual burial to either the pagan or Christian era, since the two cultures' funerary practices were so radically distinct. One of the most important differences between pagan burials and Christian ones is the importance of grave goods to the former. In the Viking Age, in particular, pagan Norse men and women were very often buried along with a plethora of things relating to either their life in this world or possibly to their journey into some other world.

The items with which a person was buried were clearly significant, but it is all too easy to leap to erroneous conclusions about what significance they had, and to whom. Perhaps the most common mistake that we make when confronted with pagan grave goods is to assume, from our knowledge of myths in written sources, that these objects were thought to accompany the

deceased into some sort of afterlife. Thus, when we discover a warrior who is buried with his sword and shield, we might assume he was prepared for his journey to Valhalla and his participation there in its everlasting fighting before the great battle at the end of the world. More specifically, a warrior grave containing a spear might indicate that the dead man hoped to live with Odin in the afterlife, since we know the spear is Odin's special weapon and Odin presides over Valhalla. These interpretations are plausible, but they are not certain: funeral customs are not only or always simply connected to beliefs about an afterlife. Some of their function as cultural signifiers may be directed back towards the living rather than forward along with the dead: a warrior's accoutrements, a lord's regalia, a smith's tools, a woman's keys or cooking vessels are symbols of these people's status in life as much as – or more than – their destination in death. The burial of a dead person's possessions is a reflection of the customs and attitudes towards death and bereavement of those who are left behind, and serves a purpose for the community that buries as well as presumably for the individual buried. It is too simplistic to claim automatically that the function of grave goods was always to accompany the deceased on his or her journey from this world into a new, mythological, one.

There is, however, a tendency among archaeologists to interpret *any* object that is not readily identifiable as possibly having some sort of religious significance, often undefined: we should beware of such interpretations. But sometimes the objects placed in a pagan grave do seem to have an intrinsically religious value. Good examples of this type of object are Thor's hammer amulets, which are found frequently in Viking-Age graves. From the many myths that describe the god's exploits carrying (or losing and retrieving) Mjöllnir, we know that the hammer was Thor's main iconographic attribute. In this case, the myths provide a key that unlocks the meaning of the artefact. From the wide distribution of these amulets, we can tell that Thor must have been a particularly popular and important deity across Scandinavia: the amulets are most common in graves from Denmark, south-east Sweden and southern Norway, but are found across the Viking world. Thor's hammer is usually interpreted as a protective symbol, although it also has connections to fertility. The frequency of its appearance in pagan graves has led some critics to think that Thor's protection was believed to extend beyond death.[1] This supposition, though reasonable on the basis of the archaeological evidence, does not accord with Thor's role in the extant

myths. The mythological Thor is regularly portrayed as the gods' protector; but he does not feature in any stories that take place in one of the worlds of the dead, nor do written sources describe him as having any connection to the afterlife. So we might question whether Thor's hammer relates specifically to his relationship to the dead person, or whether in fact it is simply a symbol of his or her religious affiliation while alive. As so often, in this case the mythological representation of a god does not fit perfectly with what we can deduce about his worship from the archaeological record.

Some artefacts have been found that actually represent a god or other mythological being, often in the context of burials. A figural representation of a god, wherever it is found, presumably had some sort of religious significance. But interpreting these artefacts remains problematic, and still depends upon our knowledge of later, narrative sources. The famous bronze image, presumably of Thor, that was found at Eyrarland, Iceland in 1817 is a case in point. A seated figure in a pointed hat or helmet grips his beard, which morphs beneath his hands into an object that may be a hammer. The identification of this figure with Thor rests on the interpretation of the object on his knees being the hammer; archaeologists have also noted that the conical headgear is also characteristic of Viking-Age god-statues, since many similar figurines found across Scandinavia have this feature. Like Thor's hammer amulets, however, the Eyrarland image comes with no context that provides a clue to its significance. The most recent interpretation of the object relates it to Thor's position as a god of wind and weather: the figure may be blowing through his beard, representing how the god was thought to produce the wind.[2] The statue may therefore have served as a charm against bad weather, or for obtaining a fair wind. For the early settlers of Iceland – the Eyrarland image dates to some time before 1000 – providing a fair wind that would allow fishing, travel and overseas trade would have been an attractive part of a god's powers. While this interpretation seems plausible, it requires us to accept several major assumptions: that the object is meant to represent Thor, and that Thor is in the act of blowing. This second aspect of the interpretation can be supported by other images of Thor that may also have him blowing through his beard, but the only written source that confirms that Thor engaged in this practice is a much later Icelandic story entitled *Rögnvalds þáttr ok Rauðs*, which does not in any case mention the purpose of this act. The third assumption, therefore, is that there is a connection between Thor blowing through his beard and one of the functional aspects of his cult:

his role in controlling the weather. If we are prepared to accept all these assumptions, then we get a highly plausible though categorically uncertain explanation of the artefact's function. But this interpretation involves accepting a fundamental anachronism: it depends upon connecting an object from a relatively early, pagan context to references in narratives that originated in a relatively late, Christian milieu.

FIGURE 2 Bronze figure from Eyrarland, Iceland (perhaps c. 1000), usually interpreted as Thor.

Less controversial, but still causing problems of interpretation, is the Lindby image from Skåne in Sweden. This figure shares with the Eyrarland image its characteristic conical hat, but it is usually assumed to represent Odin, since it appears to have only one eye: the story that explains how Odin exchanged an eye for a drink from Mímir's well of wisdom is one of the most

famous Norse myths. However, at first glance the Lindby image's most notable feature is not a missing eye, but a missing arm. I have found that people often think first of another deity, Týr, when they see the Lindby figure, because in the written sources Týr is often referred to as the one-handed god, and the myth of how he lost his hand during the binding of the monstrous wolf Fenrir is very well known. A closer examination of the artefact shows, however, that its left arm has probably just broken off below the shoulder, and its absence is of no original significance. It is, in any case, an image that requires some mythological knowledge to understand it; but even with that knowledge, it is not possible to deduce its religious status or function or to tell us very much about the myths that surrounded this god (if god it is) at the time of its creation. After all, it is impossible entirely to discount the mundane but unlikely possibility that the Lindby figure represents no more than a man in a helmet, winking. We should also remember that the meaning of artefacts could change over the course of their useful lifetimes, and that they could be reinterpreted by their pagan owners as well as by us.

FIGURE 3 Bronze figure from Lindby, Skåne, Sweden (seventh century), probably representing Odin. The figure lacks an arm as well as an eye, suggesting to some that it might represent the god Týr, winking.

RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS AND PICTURE STONES

Although pagan Scandinavians left no conventional written records of their religions and myths, they certainly did possess an alphabet. There are hundreds of surviving inscriptions in Scandinavian runes, dating from well before the Viking Age until well into the Christian period, and some of these inscriptions unsurprisingly refer to their gods. It must be noted, however, that runes were never used for the preservation of long narratives, owing to the

technical limitations imposed by the form: carving runes on wood or stone is more difficult and time consuming than writing letters on parchment or paper. Thus nothing that we might call an entire myth survives in a runic form. References to gods in runic inscriptions tend to be brief and ambiguous, but a typical formulation might resemble ‘May Thor hallow this memorial’, as we find on the Virring stone from Denmark. Many have claimed that the runic letters themselves had a religious or magical origin or function, partly on the basis of the myth of Odin’s discovery of the runes told in the eddic poem, *Hávamál*.[3] But runes themselves are not a vehicle for myth.

Viking-Age picture stones were often embellished with runic inscriptions (or, conversely, runic monuments were sometimes ornamented with pictorial art). These images provide us with the earliest artistic representations of Norse myths, as opposed to individual gods. They are found across mainland Scandinavia, although rarely in Iceland, and most date from the Viking Age. In Sweden, where Christianization took longer than in other areas of the region, mythological picture stones were still made after the year 1000.

The principal advantage of this medium for understanding Norse myths and their development is the stones’ authenticity: it is hard to forge large monuments like these, and later alterations to the images are easily discerned. Art historians have been able to date some of them quite closely on the basis of the changing style of their decoration; even when a precise date is impossible to prove, there is little doubt that mythological images of this type are genuine remnants of pagan culture, transmitted without risk of ‘contamination’ from external influences. They allow us to see what myths circulated in different parts of pagan Scandinavia, and to perceive their aesthetic appeal and cultural significance. Viking-Age picture stones rarely have a religious function, or a close connection to any religious practices, as far as we can tell. In fact, they rarely have any context which helps us to understand their origins or functions. They seem to us to display images from myths for their own sake, and can therefore be called the earliest surviving examples of the Scandinavian myth-makers’ art, but we cannot always be sure what they meant to the communities that produced and appreciated them.

Nor can we always be sure what they should say to us, since interpreting these pictures has its own difficulties. First, there is the problem of preservation. After a thousand or so years of standing outdoors in the

Scandinavian climate, weathering has quite often damaged the image on the stone so badly that it is indecipherable. More significant, however, is the problem of interpretation. Picture stones are a poor medium for telling a story; if we think of a myth as being primarily a *narrative*, we often struggle to find one in these images. Rather, they provide isolated glimpses of scenes from a myth or myths, which are sometimes juxtaposed, but never connected sequentially. If we know the story of the myth from another (usually later) source, we are often able to identify an image as a freeze-frame of the narrative's action: from this initial identification, we are tempted to assume that the singular image stands as a synecdoche of the myth, a part representing the whole, and that the whole myth was available to the carver in the form in which we now know it. While it seems like a reasonable assumption, this tendency – to interpret earlier evidence on the basis of later sources – can also cause problems, as it leads us into circular arguments. We use the evidence of an early picture stone to authenticate a much later written version of the myth, but we only know what the authentically pagan monument depicts because of what the late narrative tells us. These problems will become apparent at the end of this chapter in our discussion of the myth of Thor and the world-serpent, which was a popular subject with Viking-Age artists.

These different types of material artefacts share a characteristic that neatly illustrates the problems that we face if we try to reconstruct the myths of the *pagan* North: the closer in time that a source is to the pagan period, to the pagans themselves, and to the religions with which the myths were connected – the more authentic it is, in other words – the more difficult it is to understand. The physical remains of the Viking Age (and earlier periods) appear to put us in touch with their pagan creators, but they very rarely come with the sort of contextual information that enables us to make sense of them. Even when we can identify these objects as carrying some sort of mythic significance, on their own they reveal all too little of their meaning and even less of their functions in pagan religion or culture. To understand the myths of pagan Scandinavia, therefore, we have to turn to later versions of the myths, whose preservation is owed to the efforts of later scribes, working in a new and distinctively post-pagan medium: the Roman alphabet and the written word.

WRITTEN SOURCES

The preservation of the fullest versions of the Norse myths took place in the post-pagan period, but their original production may have occurred substantially earlier. For while Scandinavian pagans left few traces of their myths in inscribed form, and none written down conventionally, these stories certainly did circulate: they were passed around and kept alive by word of mouth as part of a long-standing tradition of orally transmitted narratives. Some of the versions of the myths that now survive only in later medieval manuscripts undoubtedly had their origins in this tradition. Old Norse mythological poetry, in particular, bears all the hallmarks of an originally oral artform. In these poems, perhaps, we hear the pagan poets' own words, even though we hear them at several removes from their original composition.

Old Norse poetry is conventionally divided into two different corpuses: skaldic and eddic. The division between them is largely artificial, and they often overlap with each other. Nevertheless, skaldic and eddic poems do often differ in their treatment of myth, and each carries with it a different set of interpretative challenges.

SKALDIC POETRY

The term 'skaldic poetry' could be seen as a tautology: the Old Norse word *skáld* simply means 'poet', and thus the basic meaning of 'skaldic poetry' is just poetry composed by a poet. Any poet in early medieval Norway or Iceland would have been a *skáld*, regardless of the form or subject-matter of his verse. Today, however, skaldic poetry is used to describe a certain type of Old Norse poetry: one which was used for public performance at royal courts and other high-status gatherings. In its most characteristic form – the complicated, highly stylized *dróttkvætt*, or 'court metre', poetry – it was popular throughout the North Sea region in the late Viking Age, reaching its zenith in the tenth century. Kings, earls and other noblemen in Norway, Denmark and the Viking-controlled territories in the British Isles recruited poets to sing their praises and commemorate their deeds, providing patronage, protection and honour in return, as well as substantial material rewards. Although there was no aristocratic market for praise-poetry in Iceland, the settlers took the skaldic form with them to their new home, and

Icelanders soon gained a reputation as the finest poets in the Viking world, whose skills were much in demand overseas. Skaldic poetry continued to be composed throughout the Middle Ages, although its popularity waxed and waned: the most traditional forms of verse, rich in mythological imagery, went out of fashion following the conversion to Christianity, until a sort of skaldic renaissance occurred in Iceland in the thirteenth century, as poets and scholars began to look with renewed interest at the literature of their ancestors. Although this late flowering of skaldic composition was primarily an antiquarian exercise in a Christian milieu, this period also saw many of the old pagan poems copied into the manuscripts where they survive to this day.

Whereas much of Old Norse literature is anonymous, skaldic poems are usually accompanied by an attribution to a named poet, who is often identifiable in the historical record. As such, it is possible to provide a circumstantial dating for many of these texts. Since we have surviving examples of this type of verse from as early as the second half of the ninth century, we can be reasonably sure that some skaldic poetry does date back to the pagan period. The name of the poet is not the only piece of information that accompanies a skaldic poem. Verses of this type are typically preserved alongside or within later prose writings – sagas or histories, for example – that tell us when, where and under what circumstances a poem was composed. But the prose contexts in which we find pagan-era poetry are always substantially younger than the poems they contain. The gap between the date of the original poem – composed for oral performance and kept alive in people's memories – and the form in which it is written down makes it difficult to be sure that a skald's work is an authentic product of the Viking Age, or that the version we now read has been reproduced faithfully enough to accurately represent the poet's original composition. The saga's information about a poem, too, may derive from the saga-author's own interpretation of the verse, and not from any independent knowledge about its origins. When we read an ancient skaldic stanza, what we read is the result of several people's efforts: the poet who originally composed it; the unknown audiences who kept the poem alive in oral form; the author of a prose saga who thought it worthwhile to add the poem to his text; and the scribe or scribes who were responsible for its final written form. At any point in this chain, errors could creep into the poem, and misapprehensions colour people's reading of it; or scribes could deliberately alter the text for a number of different reasons. So much time has intervened between a tenth-century

poem's composition and its preservation in writing in the thirteenth or fourteenth century as to make it impossible to be absolutely sure that what we read today really originated in the Viking Age.

Medieval historians, however, accepted the authenticity and reliability of skaldic poetry; they never called it into question, at least. In the preface to the great collection of sagas about the Norwegian kings known as *Heimskringla*, the author (presumed to be the Icelander Snorri Sturluson) makes a strong case for accepting that the skalds of times gone by could be relied upon as historically accurate:

> Now when Haraldr Finehair was king of Norway, Iceland was settled. At the court of King Haraldr there were skalds, and men still remember their poems and the poems about all the kings who have since his time ruled in Norway; and we gathered most of our information from what we are told in those poems which were recited before the chieftains themselves or their sons. We regard all that to be true which is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is to be sure the habit of poets to give the highest praise to those princes in whose presence they are; but no one would have dared to tell them to their faces about deeds which all who listened, as well as the prince himself, knew were only falsehoods and fabrications. That would have been mockery, and not praise.[4]

Modern scholars also accept the authenticity of many old skaldic poems, but for different reasons. It is possible to tell from the poem's language roughly to what period it should be assigned: linguistic methods cannot provide a very precise dating, but they are capable of differentiating a tenth-century poem from one composed in the thirteenth century, for example. We can therefore identify poems that come from the pagan period with some certainty. Skaldic verse is also resistant to alteration during its transmission. The *dróttkvætt* metre is so strict, and was adhered to so closely by poets, that any subsequent change to the text will normally show up as a metrical aberration and can thus be identified as an error. For these reasons, skaldic poems provide us with datable and largely reliable evidence of Viking-Age literary culture that otherwise would be inaccessible to us. And, importantly for this study, pagan skalds used this type of poetry as a vehicle for pagan myths.

Skaldic poetry gives up information reluctantly, and requires a great deal of interpretative work from its readers. It is a form of verse that places a great premium on complexity: it tends to hide simple ideas behind convoluted syntax, obscure vocabulary and cultural-linguistic codes that seem strange and secretive to modern audiences. This complexity partly derives from the

metre, since each line of a *dróttkvætt* stanza must conform to strict patterns of alliteration, internal rhyme and stress, which do not correspond with the natural structure of an Old Norse sentence. More importantly, skaldic poetry favours hidden meaning over explicit meaning on aesthetic grounds. Poets and their audiences seem to have taken pleasure respectively in concealing the poem's meaning and in untangling it. Both parties needed to be familiar with the conventions and codes of the form, with its secret language and its cultural frame of reference: we might compare it to the daily struggle between the setters of cryptic crosswords and the newspaper readers who set out to solve them.

The most characteristic feature of skaldic verse, aside from its metre, is the kenning. A kenning is a multi-part periphrastic construction that replaces a noun: a simple idea expressed in much more complicated language. At a basic level, a kenning is formed by combining two words, the second of which modifies the meaning of the first. But it is easier to illustrate the idea than to define it. Let us suppose that a poet wishes to refer to a king in a stanza: he takes the base word 'man' (kings are men after all) and modifies it with the phrase 'of rings' (a king's role was to distribute treasure to his followers and, not least, to his poets). So 'man of rings' might be understood, according to skaldic conventions, as referring to a king. But this circumlocution is still rather simple by these standards, so the poet might substitute the name Týr for the word 'man'. Týr is the name of one of the Norse gods, but in this case the poet is not talking about the god himself. Within the kenning system, 'god' can stand in place of 'man' and the name of any god can stand for the concept of 'god' in general. Thus Týr = 'god' = 'man'. 'Týr of rings' therefore remains a kenning for 'king'. Kennings, however, can be extended beyond this two-part construction, limited only by the skald's ingenuity and the confines of the *dróttkvætt* stanza. In the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturluson wrote a textbook on skaldic poetics in which he illustrates how these extended kennings work. It also provides a good example of the use that skalds typically made of mythic imagery in their work:

> [1] The splendid hater of the fire of the sea defends [2] the beloved of the enemy of the wolf; ships' prows are set before the steep [3] brows of Mímir's friend's wife. The noble mighty-ruler knows how to hold the [4] serpent's attacker's mother. [5] You who torment necklaces, enjoy [6] the troll-wife's enemy's mother until old age.[5]

In this one stanza there are six separate kennings, five of which are ‘extended’ beyond the basic form. Two of the kennings refer to the idea, mentioned above, that a king is generous with gold; the other four all apply mythological images to the description of ‘earth’ or ‘land’. This stanza, when decoded, simply states that the good king defends and keeps his land. The individual kennings, however, are explained as follows:

1 This is a two-part kenning: ‘fire of the sea’ means gold – there are several myths and legends in Norse and Germanic traditions which mention gold lying at the bottom of the sea or in a river, where it glimmers like fire. One who ‘hates’ gold is one who gives it away: thus ‘splendid hater of fire of the sea’ = ‘(generous) king’.

2 ‘Earth’ is the subject of this kenning. In Norse myth, the god Odin took the personified Earth (Jörð) as his wife. (She is referred to here as his ‘beloved’.) Odin is the enemy of the wolf, Fenrir, whom the myths tell us will kill him at the end of the world.

3 Mímir’s friend is again Odin – Odin exchanges his eye in return for a sip from Mímir’s spring of wisdom; his wife is once more Earth. Earth’s ‘brows’ are probably ‘cliffs’, although they could be ‘rocks’ or ‘mountains’. The reference to ships in this line suggests that ‘Earth’s brows’ must here be a geographical feature close to water.

4 The fourth kenning refers to Earth through another of her family relationships: her union with Odin produced the god Thor. But Thor is not simply named; like Odin he is defined by his relationship with one of the great mythological monsters. Thor fights the Miðgarðsormr, the great world-serpent, in the final battle: so the ‘serpent’s attacker’ is Thor, and his mother is Earth.

5 ‘You who torment necklaces’ is a simple kenning that picks up the idea from the start of the stanza that the king – to whom this poem is addressed – is one who does harm to golden treasure by giving it away.

6 The sixth and final kenning refers once again to Earth. Thor is famous in the myths for his fights with giants and other monsters, of which this ‘troll wife’ is presumably one. So the ‘troll wife’s enemy’s mother’ is Earth, who symbolizes the land over which the king rules.

This poem is an extreme example of using many words where one or two would have worked as well, but it gives a valuable insight into the ways in which complex kennings could be constructed, and how skalds used

mythological references. They take it for granted that their audiences will already know that Odin was married to Earth, and that Thor fought against Miðgarðsormr. They rarely tell us the story of a myth, but they frequently rely upon our possessing a great deal of prior knowledge of a certain myth, or of the mythological world in general. They are allusive rather than explicit in their meaning, and their main interest is not in the straightforward communication of information from poet to audience.

Owing to the skalds' delight in expressing mythological information only in partial or oblique allusions, as well as the fundamental difficulty of this verse-form, skaldic poetry is not a very good medium for telling complete stories. There are exceptions to this rule, however, including a late tenth-century poem by Eilífr Goðrúnarson called *Þórsdrápa*, which over several stanzas relates a version of the famous myth about Thor's experiences at the court of the giant Geirrøðr. This poem is preserved in Snorri's handbook, *Skáldskaparmál*, but Snorri found it necessary to provide a retelling of the myth in prose alongside the original poetry: quite probably because the verse was almost incomprehensible without a running gloss. *Þórsdrápa* is notoriously one of the most difficult and inscrutable of all skaldic poems, and reading it requires a very wide frame of mythological reference, as well as skill and experience in teasing out the relationships between bundles of kenning elements.

As we shall see later in the case study on the myth of Thor and the serpent, interpreting skaldic poems requires an approach similar to that needed to understand visual depictions of Norse myths. Like the picture stones, skaldic poetry generally presents us with a single image drawn from a myth; it is similarly static, and usually requires us to look beyond its own boundaries if we are to get the whole story. As we know that skaldic poetry was composed in the period in which mythological picture stones were in vogue in Scandinavia, it seems valid to suggest that the two types of source operate on similar aesthetic and cognitive levels: much of the work in interpreting both types of 'text' must be done by the audience, and *how* information is presented is often more important than what is described or depicted.

Despite its many difficulties, skaldic poetry will be of particular importance to my analysis of the Norse myths as they changed over time: it is the sole form of textual evidence that provides us with any basis for dating versions of the myths to the pagan period. Accordingly, it will act as a sort of control group to the other forms of the myths, whose relationship to the world

of authentic Norse paganism is much less secure.

EDDIC POETRY

The second category of Old Norse verse that deals with mythological subjects is known as eddic poetry. Eddic poems are normally given a privileged status as the ‘best’ forms of the myths since, in contrast to skaldic verse, their purpose is to relate a whole myth, and they do so in a much more straightforward, narrative mode. Unlike skaldic texts, however, it is difficult to date eddic poems with any certainty, and they only occur in a small number of post-conversion manuscripts.

‘Eddic poetry’ is not a medieval term, as far as we can tell. It was first used to designate this body of poems in the seventeenth century, when the famous Codex Regius manuscript (written in about 1270) was rediscovered in Iceland. The Icelandic bishop and scholar Brynjólfur Jónsson identified this book as an ‘Edda’ based on its perceived similarities to *Snorra Edda*: the thirteenth-century handbook of poetry and mythology by Snorri Sturluson was the only work entitled ‘Edda’ in the medieval period. Brynjólfur, along with other contemporary scholars, believed the Codex Regius to be older than *Snorra Edda*, and attributed its compilation to the eleventh-century historian, Sæmundr Sigfússon ‘the wise’. Thus the manuscript gained the alternative titles *Sæmundar Edda*, *Elder Edda*, or *Poetic Edda*. The term ‘eddic poetry’ then came to be applied to the type of poetry that is contained in the Codex Regius, but it has no real validity or meaning in relation to medieval Icelandic culture, and perhaps still less in relation to pagan Norse myth. It is now an accepted term of convenience for a type of Norse poetry, but the fact that a poem is now classified as ‘eddic’ should not be taken as proof that it is necessarily an old or authentic mythological composition.

If we base our definition of what eddic poetry is upon the contents of the Codex Regius, it becomes clear that this type of verse was not restricted to myth. Of the thirty-one texts in the manuscript, twenty-one tell stories deriving from ancient legends about Germanic heroes, and only ten relate the deeds of the Norse gods. The mythological poems are found at the beginning of the manuscript, and they seem to have been arranged into a logical order based upon their form and content, and possibly on the basis of which god plays the leading role in each narrative.

Table 1 The Mythological Poems of the *Poetic Edda*

	Poem	Form	Content	God as main protagonist
1	*Völuspá* ('The sibyl's prophecy')	Narrative monologue	Wisdom/ Narrative	Odin
2	*Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One')	Monologue	Wisdom	Odin
3	*Vafþrúðnismál* ('Sayings of Vafþrúðnir')	Dialogue	Wisdom	Odin
4	*Grímnismál* ('Sayings of Grímnir')	Dialogue	Wisdom	Odin
5	*För Skírnis/ Skírnismál* ('Skírnir's journey'/ 'Skírnir's sayings')	Dialogue	Narrative	Freyr
6	*Hárbarðsljóð* ('Song of Hárbarðr')	Dialogue	Narrative	Odin/Thor
7	*Hymiskviða* ('Poem of Hymir')	Third-person narrative	Narrative	Thor
8	*Lokasenna* ('Loki's quarrel')	Dialogue	Narrative	Loki/Thor
9	*Þrymskviða* ('Þrymr's poem')	Third-person narrative	Narrative	Thor
10	*Völundarkviða* ('Völundr's poem')	Third-person narrative	Narrative	None
11	*Alvíssmál* ('Sayings of All-Wise')	Dialogue	Wisdom	Thor

Although this arrangement is not quite consistent, it seems that the compiler of the Codex Regius has chosen these poems and their position in the manuscript on the basis of the sub-type of poetry that each represents. The first four poems are all about the exchange of mythological information or wisdom, and it is hardly any surprise that Odin – the god of supernatural wisdom as well as the chief of the gods – is the protagonist in each. They are expressed in direct speech, either as dramatic monologues or as knowledge-contests presented in the form of a dialogue between the god and his adversary. Poems 5–9 are all myths in the accepted sense of the word, since each tells a discrete story about the gods and their deeds, although they are told in different ways. This sequence includes a set of poems about Thor that may have been grouped together because they share the same central character. The final two poems in the mythological section of the manuscript, however, present problems. *Völundarkviða* is not a mythological poem: it tells the famous story of Völundr the Smith (Weyland in English traditions), and would look more at home in the heroic/legendary section of the manuscript: none of the gods appear in it. Its appearance here interrupts the sequence of poems about Thor which resumes with *Alvíssmál*. *Alvíssmál* is another information-exchange poem that resembles *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* in form, although Thor – who is not usually thought to be the wisest or most intelligent of the gods – unexpectedly finds himself as its protagonist.

The arrangement of the mythological poems in the Codex Regius is logical, therefore, but taken together they do not provide a complete or harmonious set of myths. They do not observe any recognizable chronological scheme, the individual poems are not connected to one another as part of a larger narrative, and the one poem that describes the end of the world in detail, *Völuspá*, does so at the beginning of the collection. In any case, we should be careful about assigning any meaning to the juxtaposition of poems in this manuscript, since there is no evidence to suggest that these poems necessarily circulated together as a body before they were written down in the Codex Regius. A thirteenth-century compiler is responsible for its current form. At the same time, mythological poetry of the eddic type is not confined to this one manuscript. A further five eddic poems about the Norse gods are found in other manuscripts: *Völuspá in skamma* (‘The shorter sibyl’s prophecy’), *Baldrs draumar* (‘Baldr’s dreams’), *Rígsþula* (‘Rígr’s

list'), *Hyndluljóð* ('Poem about Hyndla'), and *Grottasöngr* ('Grotti's song'). Six of the mythological poems (*Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *För Skírnis*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Hymiskviða*) exist in second copies in other manuscripts, none earlier than the Codex Regius.

If the texts of the eddic poems as we now read them can only be dated to the thirteenth century at the earliest, that is not to say that the poems themselves did not originate much earlier. Eddic poetry bears the hallmarks of oral-traditional verse: it is alliterative, as are older, analogous forms of Germanic oral poetry (Old English, for example); and it is formulaic – it is based upon the repetition and variation of 'blocks' of poetry that use identical metrical forms and similar wording but which can be altered to fit their context. Formulaic composition like this is also characteristic of poetry that was originally composed and disseminated in a pre-literate culture. Therefore, it seems likely that many of the eddic poems had been transmitted orally before they were committed to writing. In common with other Germanic oral traditions, the eddic poems are anonymous, and are preserved without any reference to the circumstances of their production. At present, scholars generally agree that most of these poems were composed in the pagan period, although it is difficult to be more precise than that: the tenth century is perhaps their most likely date of origin. The eddic poems' geographical origins are similarly difficult to identify. Norway seems a plausible location for their composition, since the settlers who went to Iceland were mostly Norwegian, but over the years Sweden, Denmark and the British Isles have been offered as possible homes for individual poems. Icelandic scholars have, however, generally continued to assert an Icelandic provenance for the whole corpus of poetry, as well as for the manuscripts that contain it. A couple of the mythological poems (*Hymiskviða* and *Hyndluljóð*) are probably much younger than the rest, and may be hardly older than the manuscripts that preserve them: they show that poets remained capable of composing new poetry in the eddic manner well into the Christian era. These texts are likely to have been composed in Iceland, as part of the renewed interest in pagan culture that arose there in the thirteenth century.

When dealing with oral-traditional poetry that has been preserved in written form, we must be aware that each text provides us with only a snapshot of a poem or a myth that was part of an unfixed, fluid tradition, highly susceptible to variation. The text we have before us may not be representative of the tradition as a whole; it may have been altered

consciously by successive poets over generations, or later by uncomprehending scribes; it may have been misremembered or miscopied. An eddic poem can be viewed as a fossil of a once vital living tradition of myth and poetry, which developed organically and evolved as it moved through time and space. It was not unchanging in its oral form, and we should not be misled by its present state – preserved outside its original context, fixed, lifeless – into thinking that the poem we read today is necessarily the original poem, or that it is the only possible version of the myth. Where two or more different versions of the same poem have survived, we should be wary about comparing them in an attempt to decide which is the best, oldest, or most original: if they differ, they may well differ because they meant different things to different poets at different times. These textual fossils may represent different stages in the evolution of the mythic organism, and should be judged on their own merits.

Eddic poems are undoubtedly of great significance to the study of Norse myth, but we have tended to give them too much credit, I think. They have attained the status almost of a sacred body of pagan mythological lore, but the corpus was assembled in the high Middle Ages; the texts are of a thirteenth-century date; and there exists no direct textual evidence of these poems' circulation in pre-Christian Scandinavia. If they had any direct relationship to pagan religious culture, it is almost impossible to identify it now. In this book, therefore, I shall be somewhat more sceptical about relying upon the eddic poems as our primary source for Norse myth in the pagan period, since they lack a secure historical context. However, in some cases it will be possible to supply some of that context by comparing eddic poems to authentic, datable poetry from the skaldic tradition, as well as to other textual and circumstantial evidence. Only by combining the evidence of the two types of Old Norse verse can we hope to reconstruct the place of myth in pagan poetry and the role of poetry in shaping the pagan myths.

THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

Iceland's great tradition of saga-writing in prose is unique and justifiably famous throughout the world. It is also very varied: the term 'saga' is a catch-all term in Old Norse for any prose narrative, and encompasses love stories and saints' lives, tales of legendary heroes and ordinary farmers, sober historical writing and the most luridly entertaining fantasies. Many of the

sagas look back in time, to the age of the Icelandic settlements and beyond: as such, they frequently deal with the pagan past. Attitudes towards and representations of the pagan period vary according to the type of saga, but in general they are not primarily interested in their ancestors' myths. Occasionally, however, we can discern isolated mythic elements in a saga-narrative, or else find out information about pagan religion that can illuminate myths found in other sources. Of the many sub-genres of Icelandic sagas, the most useful are probably the *Íslendinga sögur* ('sagas of Icelanders'), the *konunga sögur* ('kings' sagas'), and *fornaldar sögur* ('sagas of long ago').

The *Íslendinga sögur* are the most famous type of sagas, the undisputed apogee of the medieval Icelandic prose tradition. They describe life in the so-called 'Saga Age', the period from the first settlement of Iceland in the mid ninth century up to about 1050. This period includes the country's conversion to Christianity in 999 or 1000, and this momentous event is a favourite topic of the authors of *Íslendinga sögur*. The settlers who came to Iceland from Norway were of course pagans, and they presumably brought their forms of religion into the new country with them. The *Íslendinga sögur* occasionally provide some details about pagan religious practices and attitudes, but they hardly ever make any reference to pagan myth. While the Norse gods are occasionally named, we do not learn much about how people perceived them, or what stories were attached to them: merely that they were the object of peoples' worship. So the *Íslendinga sögur* are not much use as a primary source for Norse myth, *per se*. However, they do have two useful functions. First, they are a repository of a great deal of skaldic poetry, some of which is likely to have been composed in the period in which the saga's narrative is set, even though we cannot always rely upon the saga for accurate information about its origins. Often a saga-author must have composed a poem from scratch to fit into his narrative, or taken an existing poem out of context to embellish his story. It is simply impossible to believe, every time a saga puts a verse into the mouth of a character, that a real historical person spoke that verse, and that it had been remembered and recited down to the time of the saga's composition. Yet pagan Icelanders do sometimes speak in their own voices, through their own poetry, within the *Íslendinga sögur*; and like so much skaldic verse, the stanzas that the sagas preserve often make use of mythological imagery. The second main value of the *Íslendinga sögur* is as a source for the history of Norse paganism and particularly the conversion, which can give a useful religious context for myths found in other sources.

This type of saga is not necessarily perfectly reliable as a historical source. The *Íslendinga sögur* began to be written down in the twelfth century, and most of the extant texts date from the late thirteenth century or after. There is therefore a substantial gap between the events the sagas describe and their date of composition. Their sources were probably a combination of older poetry and oral traditions, but in their current form they resemble historical fiction more than historical fact. As literary texts, their authors' main motivation was not to represent the Saga Age as it was, but rather to recreate it according to their own designs: as far as religion is concerned, the *Íslendinga sögur* seem to have had two predominating agendas. They were concerned to show their pagan ancestors in a generally favourable, and often glorious, light; but they also wanted to show how eagerly and efficiently the Icelanders adapted to Christianity when it had been introduced to them. There is a certain teleology to the *Íslendinga sögur*'s representation of religion: because paganism in Iceland was known to have disappeared relatively completely and relatively quickly, Christian authors looking back on the pre-conversion period were able to represent paganism in a relatively favourable light, without feeling much need to condemn it. But the fact that they approved of their noble heathen ancestors does not necessarily prove that the authors told (or knew) the truth about paganism.

The *konunga sögur* ('kings' sagas') also mostly date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although there is evidence that their composition began some time earlier than the *Íslendinga sögur*. As the genre's label suggests, the kings' sagas look outward from Iceland (which did not have a king) to Norway and the wider Viking world. Examples of Norwegian *konunga sögur* survive, so we know that – unlike the *Íslendinga sögur* – they are not a purely Icelandic phenomenon.

Konunga sögur are more interested in pagan religion than pagan myth; they are useful because they provide us with evidence about the nature of pagan culture in mainland Scandinavia, but they do not, strictly speaking, preserve myths themselves. However, in some cases myth has undoubtedly influenced the kings' sagas' representation of history. The most conspicuous example of this process is *Ynglinga saga*, which is the first section of *Heimskringla* – the long history of the kings of Norway from their beginnings up to 1177, usually attributed to Snorri Sturluson. In this saga, Snorri describes the ultimate origins of the Norwegian rulers in Sweden, and traces their ancestry back to the Norse gods, who here exist on the borderline

between the human and the divine worlds. Several of the stories that Snorri tells about the *Ynglingar* (the family name of the Swedish kings) are recognizably paralleled in mythological sources, but *Ynglinga saga* transmutes them into quasi-history, by relating them to historical events and people, and by setting them in the everyday world rather than the mythical. Thus, Odin in *Ynglinga saga* is a human king with special skills, almost supernatural abilities and delusions of grandeur, who decides that he will enter the world of the gods after his death. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy; his followers begin to believe that he really has gone to the gods' home, and that in so doing he has become a god himself. They begin to worship him accordingly. Other gods – Njörðr, Freyr and Freyja – succeed Odin and continue to act in accordance with their mythic natures and attributes, but within a narrative that is presented as being a matter-of-fact record of times past.

Ynglinga saga would not satisfy a modern readership as accurate historiography, of course, but that is not its aim. In these early sections of his history, Snorri achieves two things. He provides an origin-myth for the kings of Scandinavia, which asserts their claims to their thrones as deriving from a sort of divine right, via their descent from the gods. At the same time, he regards these very gods as being ultimately no more than a set of high-status leaders with unusual attributes. He explains away the origins of paganism as a sort of delusion, while at the same time locating the origins of kingship in the North in this complex of social and religious conventions. As a Christian author, Snorri could not believe in the pagan gods or be seen to advocate any such belief; yet he was aware that Scandinavian culture was founded in paganism, and that it retained important cultural resonances long after the conversion. *Ynglinga saga* is part of his attempt to reconcile these apparently antagonistic ideas.

Like all the *konunga sögur*, *Ynglinga saga* makes use of multiple sources. The kings' sagas borrow from each other freely; together they make up a large and tangled network of interrelated accounts that stretches from Iceland to Norway and back again. They also have textual relationships with Latin histories of Norway, either as suppliers or receivers of information: relatively few Latin texts survive from medieval Scandinavia, and it is likely that the influence of Latin historical writing on the *konunga sögur* was greater than it now appears. Above all, however, the kings' sagas use skaldic poetry, for the reasons Snorri gives in the preface to *Heimskringla*. They are a highly

valuable repository of skaldic verse, and particularly of the oldest examples of the form (dating back to the ninth and tenth centuries). Scholars also believe that the verses found in the *konunga sögur* are more likely to be authentic – less likely to be much later fabrications – than those found in the Sagas of Icelanders, since to wilfully misattribute or misrepresent a stanza would invalidate the whole history's claims to accuracy.

The *fornaldar sögur* ('sagas of long ago') occupy a somewhat ironic position in the corpus: they are the sagas that always set their narratives in the pre-Christian world, yet they give us probably the least reliable information about it. The *fornaldar sögur* are distinctive for a number of reasons. They are, as a whole, slightly later than the other genres, only becoming truly popular in the fourteenth century. They are often influenced by foreign literary forms: European romance, folk-tale and heroic legend, for example. They do not use skaldic poetry as a source for their narrative; when they include verse, it is normally of an eddic type, and it is never the authentic product of the period that the sagas describe. When authors bring pre-existing poetry into their *fornaldar sögur*, it is almost always a late literary confection, composed in imitation of the type of verse that they thought might have been current long ago. What we now call skaldic poetry was associated with history; poetry of the eddic type was better fitted to stories that take place outside of history: for myths and legends, in other words.

Probably the best way to define a *fornaldar saga* is on the basis of its relationship to conventional schemes of time and space. A 'saga of long ago' is set before the settlement of Iceland: often, long before. Their stories reach beyond the Viking Age, into the dim and distant past of the Germanic migrations (fifth–sixth centuries). They take place in (to the Icelanders) strange and obscure lands like Russia, Germany or Sweden. If characters do visit the more familiar Denmark or Norway, these locations bear little resemblance to their actual geography. The *fornaldar sögur* are populated by fire-breathing dragons, semi-human heroes, trolls and monsters and kings with magic swords: they are a world away from the predominantly realistic representation of Icelandic society that we find in the *Íslendinga sögur*. And, in these sagas, the old gods sometimes walk the earth: not as deified humans, as they are in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, but with all their familiar mythical attributes, and their divine power intact.

The *fornaldar sögur* are frequently based on traditions that must be quite old, as their correspondences with other Germanic narratives from the early

Middle Ages suggest. Their ultimate origins are in the common stock of traditions that the Germanic tribes took with them as they dispersed across the European continent and into Scandinavia and the British Isles. In their current form, however, they represent a relatively late development of these traditions, and their stories are likely to have changed significantly over time. The myths that they preserve cannot always be paralleled in earlier sources; when they cannot, they should probably be viewed as late re-imaginings of the ancient pre-Christian world. The *fornaldar sögur* are often compared to other types of fantastic literature. Although that term is difficult to apply to any medieval genre, they do present us with a late medieval fantasy of what 'long ago' was like that is interesting for its own sake, but which probably tells us very little about the myths which were told in the North when it was still pagan.

SNORRA EDDA

Snorri Sturluson (1179–1244) is unquestionably the most important figure in the history of Norse mythology. As I have already noted, he was responsible for the preservation of many old poems in his historical work (*Heimskringla*) and treatise on skaldic poetry (the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda*). But Snorri was also the first person to treat Scandinavian mythology as a distinct category, to analyze it from a scholarly perspective, and to attempt to fit the different myths into a coherent and systematic form. He was the first mythographer to look at the myths of the pagan North as a special category of story (although he never used the word 'myth' himself – Old Norse does not possess an equivalent term). *Snorra Edda* gives us the fullest forms of the myths as they were known to medieval Icelanders; it preserves several narratives that no longer survive in poetic form; most importantly of all, it provides explanations for many of the obscure mythic references found in the poetry that we otherwise would have little hope of decoding.

Snorra Edda is usually dated to around 1225, but we know very little about its genesis. Its attribution to Snorri rests upon a reference at the start of the earliest known manuscript of the text, the 'Uppsala Edda', which was written around 1300. This manuscript specifies that Snorri Sturluson 'put this book together in the manner it appears here' and it outlines the text's component parts, which cover both myth and poetry. Myth and poetry certainly go hand in hand in *Snorra Edda*. It seems that Snorri's aim was to enable

contemporary poets to compose verse in the traditional skaldic style, and to allow contemporary audiences to understand and appreciate older verse. In order to do this, he set out to describe the technical aspects of *dróttkvætt* poetry, its metre and use of kennings, and also its place in a wider cultural context. Poetry had an important place in Old Norse myth; myth, of course, had no less significance in traditional poetry. So to enable a thirteenth-century audience to make sense of this form of verse, Snorri set out to give as much information about the myths of his pagan ancestors as was available to him.

There are four parts to *Snorra Edda*. As well as *Háttatal* and *Skáldskaparmál*, which are mainly concerned with poetics, there is *Gylfaginning* ('Gylfi's Delusion') and a *Prologue*, which provides a pseudo-historical framework for the myths that strongly resembles Snorri's treatment of the gods in *Ynglinga saga*. *Skáldskaparmál* includes some myths, but these are mostly related to specific examples from skaldic verse, serving to explain a particular kenning-type or other aspect of poetic diction. *Gylfaginning*, on the other hand, provides us with a comprehensive history of the mythological universe, from the creation of the world to its end. In this section of the *Edda*, Snorri uses eddic poems as his main sources. But he also includes several independent myths that are not found in full anywhere else in the corpus, and it is usually impossible to tell whether he was using poems that have since been lost as his source, or to what extent the myths of *Gylfaginning* are his original compositions. In some cases, as we will see in Chapter 6, Snorri introduces elements into his narrative that are unlikely to derive from native mythic traditions; instead, they may reflect thirteenth-century attitudes towards paganism or Snorri's desire to make a coherent system out of a body of myths that was anything but coherent and systematic in its inherited form.

In *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri's attitude towards pagan myth is non-judgemental, even if it is unlikely to be as objective as it appears. Unlike many medieval commentators on pagan religion and culture, Snorri never equates the old gods with demons; he never condemns his ancestors for their beliefs. At the same time, Snorri is concerned, across the *Edda* as a whole, to maintain a safe distance between his Christian audience and the religion that underpins the myths that he retells. Near the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál* he gives explicit advice to his readers about how they should use the book:

> But these things have to be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to understand what is expressed obliquely. Then let such a one take this book as scholarly enquiry and entertainment. But these stories are not to be consigned into oblivion or demonstrated to be false, so as to deprive poetry of ancient kennings which major poets have been happy to use. Yet Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, nor in the truth of this account in any way other than that in which it is presented at the beginning of this book, where it is told what happened when mankind went astray from the true faith, and after that about the Turks, how the people of Asia, known as Æsir, distorted the accounts of the events that took place in Troy so that the people of the country would believe that they were gods.[6]

In this 'advice to young poets', Snorri refers back to the *Edda*'s *Prologue*, in which he explains the origins of paganism as a sort of blameless delusion: pagans were of course created by God, and originally had knowledge of God, but they gradually lost this knowledge. Their natural ability to reason led them to seek out alternative ways of understanding the world, which led to their jumping to misguided, though entirely rational, conclusions about the way the universe works. Eventually, they came to imbue natural phenomena with divine power, and finally to regard their early kings and chieftains to be gods. It is within this conceptual framework that *Snorra Edda* must be read: it simultaneously tells its audience that paganism is wrong (i.e. incorrect) and not wrong (i.e. not blameworthy), and that there is still much to be cherished in pagan traditions, as long as the pagans' old mistakes are not repeated.

Some scholars have suggested that the learned Christian rationalizing of these parts of the *Edda* is incompatible with the straight-faced and apparently serious presentations of the mythology in *Gylfaginning*: at their most extreme, they have even argued that the *Prologue* and 'advice to young poets' section cannot have been composed by Snorri, because of this supposed ideological clash within the text. However, the *Prologue* is found in all the medieval manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*: there is no evidence that *Gylfaginning* ever circulated without it. If we are to make sense of the myths that the *Edda* contains, we must take into account all its aspects, including those which provide contexts for the re-use of pagan myths in Christian Iceland. Snorri was a mediator between two different worlds, and both the pagan and Christian worldviews inform his mythology.

Modern readers often take *Snorra Edda* as their starting point for an exploration of the Norse myths, and it is easy to see why: no other text presents this material in such a comprehensive and comprehensible way. But it is a relatively late reconstruction of pagan mythology done by an author

who emphasizes that the pagan world is one that has vanished, or is vanishing; he does not share the worldview that he expounds. It provides us with a fascinating insight into the long afterlife of myths beyond the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity, but we can only use it as a guide to what pagans actually believed or thought, or what stories they told, if we exercise considerable caution. As an account of pagan mythology, *Snorra Edda* may look authoritative, but it is very unlikely to be wholly authentic.

FOREIGN SOURCES

The types of written sources I have just described are all classed as 'native': they are written in Old Norse, and form part of a network of vernacular texts that centres on Iceland. But authors beyond the Norse world also took some interest in pagan religion and mythology, as did Scandinavians who wrote in Latin.

Foreign authors provide a valuable – though often very sketchy – external perspective on Scandinavian paganism. The Roman historian Tacitus, who described some aspects of Scandinavian culture in his ethnographic study of the Germanic tribes, written around 100 AD, was the first of these writers. Of course, Tacitus's Germans may bear little resemblance to the northern pagans of the Viking Age, but his account is virtually the only written evidence that touches upon religion in the Iron Age: a period in which Scandinavian paganism may have been coalescing into its historical forms. Taken alongside contemporary archaeological evidence – and with a pinch of salt – Tacitus gives us an inkling of what the early Germanic peoples were like, or at least how they were perceived by the dominant cultural force of the time, Rome.

Later 'foreign' authors (those who do not write in Old Norse) share with Tacitus an external viewpoint: in the Middle Ages, their perspective on Scandinavian myth and religion was most often shaped by Christianity, the newly dominant mode of belief throughout Europe. When non-pagan writers comment on paganism, their accounts are therefore liable to misunderstanding and bias: they describe a worldview that they do not share, that they do not understand and one that they often feel the need to condemn explicitly. One of the most famous external accounts of Norse paganism is found in Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, which was written some time between 1066 and 1072. Adam was an assistant to the then archbishop, Adalbert, who had special responsibility for

overseeing missionary efforts among the still-pagan Swedes (who fell under the purview of the Hamburg diocese at this period, and clung on to their pagan religions much more tenaciously than people in the other Nordic countries). In Book 4 of his history, Adam famously describes the pagan temple at Uppsala, with a full account of the rites performed there and mention of the main gods who were the recipients of this worship. It is one of the most detailed contemporary accounts of pagan religious practices to have come down to us. But Adam had never been to Uppsala; he never even visited Sweden, as far as we know. He had to rely on (at best) second-hand information, and this information was provided to him by fellow Christians. So his description of the temple may be unreliable; even if his informants had represented accurately what they had seen or heard of the Uppsala rituals, they – or he – have interpreted them in the light of their own, Christian opinions about religious truth and falsehood. Adam's version of the description could even be read as propaganda, designed to assert the need for the archbishop's missionaries to bring about a swift and comprehensive conversion of the pagans, whose practices are rather disgusting to him (and presumably to his intended audience). Still, Adam of Bremen's account provides another means of relating myth to reality, even if his work is unreliable. In the absence of much other contemporary written evidence about pagan religion, he hints to us what the gods might have been for, and how people related to them. Using this type of information may help us to explain the role and function of the gods in the pagans' myths, even though the myths do not themselves come from the milieu that Adam describes.

In general, foreign authors were more interested in the pagan religions of the Norsemen than in their mythology. One exception to this rule is the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. Towards the end of the twelfth century Saxo, who was probably a clerk in the service of the archbishop of Lund, wrote a monumental history of the Danish people from their beginnings onwards. This Latin work, the *History of the Kings and Heroes of the Danes*, is remarkable for the amount of stories it includes that might be termed 'myths', or which at any rate seem to derive from or relate to the myths that we know from Icelandic sources.

Saxo, of course, was not entirely a foreigner: Norse paganism was as much part of Denmark's heritage as it was Iceland's. But he still had an outsider's perspective on his material. He was an educated Christian, familiar with Latin writers like Vergil, and he worked a century after Adam of Bremen, by which

time paganism had officially been defeated even in Sweden. It was no longer a threat to Christendom. Like the Icelandic authors of the thirteenth century, Saxo felt free to look back on his ancestors' culture without needing to condemn their religion. Accordingly, the heroes of the first eight books of the *History of the Danes* are figures who exist on the shady boundary between history, legend and myth. But they are never blamed for not being Christians. The Norse gods, too, appear in Saxo's writings: he records several narratives that seem to be variant versions of myths that survive in Old Norse poetry and *Snorra Edda*. Odin is an important figure, as is his son, Baldr: but Saxo's stories of these famous gods never agree entirely with their portrayal in other sources.

We do not know where Saxo found his sources of Norse myths or to what extent he has reproduced them accurately. It seems likely that his stories have been heavily reworked according to his own literary designs, since he was a self-conscious and rather wordy literary author whose stylistic models came from the Roman Classics. But did he know the Norse myths as the Icelanders knew them, or even as we know them now? In the preface to his work, Saxo praises the Icelanders for the zeal with which they kept alive their ancient traditions (even if it is a rather backhanded compliment):

> The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence . . . Thus I have scrutinised their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognised such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.[7]

Unfortunately, however, we have no access to the Icelandic writings that Saxo was so keen to accept as reliable witnesses: hardly any texts that pre-date Saxo survive from Iceland. Saxo also tells us that the Danes of times past had 'engraved the letters of their own language on rocks and stones to retell those feats of their ancestors which had been made popular in the songs of their mother tongue', and claims to have translated some of these songs into Latin. So, like any modern student of Norse myth, Saxo used a range of different sources – poetry, runic inscriptions and Icelandic writings – in building up his picture of the ancient culture of the North. Or at least that is what he says he has done. This type of authenticating device is of little value if it cannot itself be authenticated, and scholars have not had much success in

identifying Saxo's Old Norse sources, whether in poetry, prose or runic letters.

Saxo is the earliest post-pagan Scandinavian author to revisit the Norse myths and to make something new out of them. In this way his work anticipates the flowering of interest in pagan culture that happened in Iceland over the following two centuries, but we cannot say that he initiated this trend: we do not have any evidence for the transmission of his work elsewhere in Scandinavia before the sixteenth century. It stands alone as a detailed and lengthy narrative in Latin that deals with mythical material more normally attested in the vernacular. As such, it is difficult to know what to make of Saxo's versions of the myths.

This list of foreign accounts of Scandinavian paganism is not exhaustive: everywhere the Vikings went, scandalized monks recorded their misdeeds in chronicles, letters and sermons. But the majority of such sources never go far beyond the idea that the Vikings are pagans, and that paganism is wrong, and that Vikings are horrid at least partly because of their pagan religion. They provide little information about the nature of that religion, and still less about the mythology that was related to it.

Occasionally, these eye-witness accounts provide us with brief flashes of illumination: in the 920s, the Arab diplomat Ibn Fadlan wrote a famous account of a ship-cremation among the Rus (the name given to the traders and settlers of Scandinavian descent who operated along the rivers of modern-day Russia and Ukraine) that is easily the most detailed first-hand written witness to pagan funeral rites. Many Norse myths are related to death and dying, and his report offers a seemingly objective historical correlative to these stories; it shows how people's religious beliefs might be enacted in a social context. Ibn Fadlan, whose testimony we will return to in Chapter 2, was not a Viking victim or a terrorized Christian, and he does not share the common anti-pagan perspective of the time. But he was very much an outsider, and his work is certainly sensationalist and may be unrepresentative of what actually went on among the Rus on the banks of the Volga. We do not know where he got all of his information from; we do not know how far his own point of view as a foreigner and an educated, Muslim Arab has coloured his account. In this way he provides yet another example of how our impression of the Norsemen, their religion and myths, changes according to whose account we hear.

CONCLUSION

Norse mythology is known to us through sources that display dozens of different perspectives on the pagan gods of Scandinavia. The sources span chronologically from the Iron Age to the late medieval period and are of several very different types, ranging from grave goods to ancient oral poetry and much later scholarly histories. Some of these sources are undoubtedly pagan, representing a mentality that predates Christianity's introduction into Northern Europe, and help to show what place myths had in that worldview. But as a rule, the older our source material, the less it tells us about the myths themselves. In the oldest sources, a myth-maker could assume the audience's full knowledge of the story and so we now see only glimpses of the full mythology, fragments of a system of belief and narrative that is now inaccessible to us in its whole.

The Norse myths come into focus only later, and only under outside influence. The mythological poetry that provides us with the standard versions of these stories survives because it was preserved in manuscripts that were written long after the conversion, by Christians. By the time these manuscripts were written, Christianity had been present in Scandinavia for several centuries, and many of the surviving myths seem to be the product of a transitional religious outlook: one that was basically pagan but which knew of Christianity and reacted – positively or negatively – to the new myths that the missionaries brought with them. The fullest and most important versions of many Norse myths display this double perspective on their stories, and are probably the product of religious and cultural tensions between the two dominant belief systems in medieval Scandinavia. These tensions can manifest themselves in sources from the pagan period as well as in historically oriented literature produced after the conversion. The Norse myths are not a product simply of the Norse pagan religion, but depend upon long processes of religious and cultural change, textual transmission, interpretation and reinterpretation. These stories have always meant different things to different people, and they always will.

CASE STUDY: *THOR AND THE*

MIÐGARÐSORMR

One of the most famous and entertaining of the Norse myths is the story of Thor's attempt to fish for Miðgarðsormr, the great serpent that lies beneath the sea, its enormous body encircling the whole world. The popularity of this story is long standing. There are two full narrative versions of the myth in medieval texts: it forms part of the plot of the eddic poem *Hymiskviða* ('Hymir's poem') and it is told in prose in *Snorra Edda*. *Hymiskviða* is a relatively late poem, probably composed soon after – or soon before, or around the same time as – Snorri's version, with which it shares many details. In its fullest form, therefore, the myth of Thor's fishing expedition is – like many of the Norse myths as they survive today – a creation of the post-pagan period that has been preserved in medieval Icelandic writings. But we also find references to the myth in much earlier sources, which also cover a wide geographical area.[8] These earlier examples only relate the story in part or by allusion, but they provide glimpses of an ongoing tradition that stretches back into the pagan period. They occur in different media, representing the full range of source types in which Norse myths are preserved. Studying the differences between these sources gives us an important insight into the problems and challenges posed by any attempt to integrate different versions of a myth into one single myth. We must ask ourselves: is the myth of Thor and the world-serpent the sum of all these variants? Or does each source provide us with a unique myth, subtly different from the others? How do they relate to each other, and is it possible to state which version is the original one, the most authentic or 'best'? By looking at the variability of these versions, these micro-myths, we may try to assess how the story's meaning and significance changed across time and in different places; alternatively, we might find that the myth is fundamentally stable, perhaps leading us to think of it as having an unchanging message, separate from its time-bound contexts.

THE 'STANDARD' FORM OF THE MYTH: *SNORRA EDDA*

Snorra Edda provides us with a complete and straightforward account of Thor's adventure, which I shall use as our starting point.[9] According to Snorri, Thor one day set out alone, disguised as a harmless youth, and walked

across Miðgarðr, the realm of men, until he reached a house belonging to a giant named Hymir, where he stayed for the night. The next morning, Hymir got ready to go out fishing. When Thor asked to accompany him, Hymir scoffed at the idea that such a puny youth could be any help to him, warning Thor that he'd be liable to catch cold if he came out to sea as far as the giant was used to rowing. Thor resisted the temptation to show his true strength in his usual manner (by bringing his hammer down on Hymir's head), saying merely that he might not be the one who first begged to return to shore. When the giant told Thor to fetch his own bait, if he was coming out to fish, the god decapitated Hymir's biggest ox and took the head down to the boat. Their combined strength soon propelled them out to Hymir's usual fishing grounds, but Thor refused to stop there and kept on rowing. Then Hymir said that it was dangerous to go further out to sea because they would enter the waters that the snake patrols near the edge of the world, but Thor insisted on rowing further still. When he finally put up his oars and began to fish, Thor fastened the ox-head to a mighty hook on the end of a 'pretty strong' rope, and dropped the bait to the bottom of the ocean. The serpent could not resist the ox-head, and Thor's hook was soon stuck fast in the monster's mouth. A great tussle began, with the serpent jerking away so hard that Thor's fists banged on the gunwale of the boat. Enraged, Thor summoned up his great divine strength, pushing down so hard that his feet burst through the hull of the boat. Bracing himself on the sea's bottom itself, Thor hauled Miðgarðsormr up to the surface. And – so says *Snorra Edda* – 'one can claim that a person does not know what a horrible sight is who did not get to see how Thor fixed his eyes on the serpent, and the serpent stared up at him spitting poison'. Terrified, Hymir panicked and, just at the moment when Thor stood with his hammer poised, ready to dispatch his foe, the giant cut the fishing-line. The serpent sank back below the waves. Thor threw his hammer into the sea after it, and some claim that he took off the serpent's head with the shot. But Snorri's narrator disagrees, stating that he thinks it more likely that Miðgarðsormr lives to this day in the encircling sea. The myth concludes in this version with the comic image of Thor knocking Hymir headlong out of the boat, before wading back to shore.

Snorri's version of this story, as is usual with his work, is the clearest and most comprehensible telling of the myth that survives. Its outline will provide us with a model with which we can compare the other, older versions of the narrative that exist in different source types.

PICTORIAL SOURCES

Thor's fishing expedition is depicted on a number of picture stones from across the North Sea region. As is almost always the case with this type of non-narrative source material, however, our understanding of what the picture stones show is very strongly coloured by our knowledge of later, literary iterations. If we did not have access to *Snorra Edda* or *Hymiskviða*, we would only be able to interpret these images in their broadest sense. Much of our understanding of the myth depends on our having read it in its fullest, apparently most complete, version. But to read backwards through time like this has risks: we are all too likely to imagine that the artisans who carved the picture stones knew the same myth that Snorri did, and as we do. In fact, there is no way of telling what has been omitted owing to the constraints of the pictorial medium or the artist's personal preference, or which elements simply were not part of the myth at this point in time.

The oldest witness to the myth of Thor and the world-serpent is probably the carved stone from the churchyard at Hørdum in North Jutland, Denmark. It is impossible to be certain of this, however, for the usual reason: it is impossible to date accurately, like so many monuments of this type. Scholars accept that the carving is from the pagan era or the time of Christianization, but that range covers the whole period between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The subject matter of the image appears to be entirely non-Christian, and there are no iconographic indications that it is the product of a hybrid pagan-Christian worldview. So perhaps it is from earlier in the possible date range, rather than later. The second problem with the Hørdum stone is also one that we encounter frequently when dealing with this type of source: the image has been damaged by weathering, and as well as being incomplete is now indistinct without the application of a contrasting pigment to help us trace its outlines. This damage means that we cannot be sure what the artist intended his picture to convey, what is missing and what was never supposed to be there.

FIGURE 4 Picture stone from Hørdum, Jutland, Denmark (between 800 and 1100), representing Thor fishing for Miðgarðsormr. Thor's foot has gone through the hull of the boat; the giant Hymir threatens to cut the line.

It is still easy to see, however, why the Hørdum image is believed to depict a scene from this myth. It seems to show us one of the most dramatic and crucial moments in the story: a figure strains at a fishing line over the gunwale of a boat, and his foot is clearly visible emerging through the bottom of the craft. His companion, meanwhile, holds an axe or similar weapon, apparently poised to cut the rope. Unfortunately, the bottom half of the slab is too badly worn to make out the snake's form, although the partial curve that remains visible does suggest the serpentine coil of an enormous monster.

Two figures, fishing for an enormous creature; the fisherman pulling so hard on the taut line that his foot bursts through the boat; another man

attempting to cut the line: all these elements are present in the standard form of the myth. But the narrative from *Snorra Edda* contains much that the stone cannot tell us. We cannot even be sure that in this representation of the myth it is Thor who is fishing. There is no iconographic element that identifies this figure as the red-bearded god, and the carving is so spare and simple as to make it difficult to differentiate between the two figures, other than by the actions they are performing. Our interpretation of this artefact therefore depends on using other versions of the myth to make sense of it, to fill in its blanks.

A second picture stone helps us to do that. The Altuna stone was almost certainly carved in the early eleventh century, and is found in present-day Sweden. This region became Christianized somewhat later than Denmark, so the Altuna image is likely also to be the product of a pagan artist, even though it is later than the one from Hørdum. There is an inscription in runes on one of the stone's edges which states that it commemorates Holmfastr and Arnfastr, father and son, who had both been burned. Cremation was a distinctively pagan practice, which the Christian church stamped out as it spread through Scandinavia. The presence of this detail, combined with the lack of any Christian imagery, makes the attribution of this monument to the pagan period secure.

FIGURE 5 Picture stone from Altuna, Uppland, Sweden (eleventh century), showing Thor (with hammer) and Miðgarðsormr. Thor's foot has broken through the boat's planks.

Altuna, like Hørdum, shows the main figure's foot emerging beneath the boat. But here, the identification of the fisherman with Thor is made much easier by the presence of a large and distinct hammer, Thor's universal emblem, in his right hand. Also present is a large sea-monster, twisting back on itself with its jaws gaping. The bait, according to Snorri the head of Hymir's prize ox, is also visible on the end of Thor's line, while Hørdum lacks this detail in its present state. Hymir, though, is absent from the Swedish picture. Probably the narrowness of the stone's side prevented the artist from fitting the giant into the boat with Thor, but it is impossible to be certain. Like Hørdum, the Altuna image gives us a frozen snapshot of the myth's climactic scene, although the carving lacks the dynamic tension in the struggle that the stretched line of the Hørdum picture suggests. The similarities between the two picture stones, however, certainly indicate that

narratives about Thor's fishing trip were known in both Denmark and Sweden before the conversion. They share significant features with each other, but they are not identical, and neither can include all the elements that are present in *Snorra Edda*. The picture stone is too static a medium for the effective presentation of successive action; it can never tell the whole story.

Sometimes an early picture stone can simply tell us the wrong story. Or rather, modern viewers of an artefact can be much too quick to make connections from the picture in front of them to a wider mythic tradition. A good example of that tendency is the Gosforth 'fishing' stone. Found in Cumbria, northern England, it is a product of a style of tenth-century carving that is hybrid in two ways: it is Anglo-Scandinavian, reflecting the ethnic and cultural mix of this part of England in the Viking Age; and it seems to originate in a mixed, pagan-Christian, conversion-era community.

The lower panel on the Gosforth stone has often been interpreted as containing another iteration of the myth of Thor and Miðgarðsormr. In this scene, two indistinct figures are identically posed in a boat, their arms outstretched. One of them holds something in its left hand: this object may well be the start of a rope that appears again below the boat (and presumably passes through the hull). The rope terminates in a three-pronged hook or possibly an anchor with three flukes; perhaps there is the suggestion of an ox's head at the end of the line. At the bottom panel are several mysterious forms that perhaps represent fishes or other creatures of the deep, although they might also be waves. None of them looks sufficiently large and serpentine to represent Miðgarðsormr, however. It is probably a fishing scene. But what makes it a representation of the Thor myth? There are two figures in a boat; one is fishing. But the Gosforth stone lacks the motif of Thor's foot going through the boat; nobody tries to cut the line, and no serpent takes the bait. There is an object between the two figures that somewhat resembles a hammer, but it is more likely to be a stylized ship's mast. If it represents Thor's hammer, it is too tall to be in scale with the figures and its head is unusually small relative to the shaft. Elsewhere, when Thor is depicted with his weapon, it is invariably in his hand, as in the Altuna picture. It is thus certainly possible to doubt whether this stone is really a depiction of the same myth.

FIGURE 6 Picture stone from Gosforth, Cumbria, England (tenth century), possibly a panel from a stone cross. The figures in the boat are commonly interpreted as Thor and Hymir.

In fact, it is quite possible to argue that the Gosforth stone bears an entirely Christian meaning. The upper panel shows a stag trampling on a snake – a conventional allegorical figure that represents Christ triumphing over the Devil in medieval art. But there is no snake in the lower image, which makes an interpretation that might equate the world-serpent with the Devil hard to sustain. While scholars have suggested that the juxtaposition of the two panels implies that a scene from a Norse myth is being compared to a Christian idea – and we know that missionaries were willing and able to make these parallels, which are reflected in other picture stones – it is also possible that the iconography of both panels is Christian. The image of Christ and the apostles as fishermen is a widespread one, and is perhaps particularly

appropriate in a missionary setting. The Gospel of Matthew records (4.19) that Christ promised his disciples that they would become ‘fishers of men’, and this metaphor for the evangelical mission persisted. We might also see, if we so wished, a symbolic representation of the cross or Christ crucified in the outstretched arms of the two figures. In this instance, neither the pagan nor the Christian connotations of the image are sufficiently clear to permit us to draw a firm conclusion. Problems of disputed interpretation like this one are often encountered in pictorial art that originates in the transitional period between paganism and Christianity.

Overall, the clear correspondences between the pictures on the Altuna and Hørdum stones are convincing evidence that the myth of Thor and Miðgarðsormr existed in the Viking Age, and that it was known in both Sweden and Denmark. The Gosforth stone suggests that the same myth was also known in a part of northern England that was under Scandinavian influence, although the scene it depicts is open to a variety of possible interpretations. We cannot tell from these partial glimpses of the myth, however, whether it was transmitted in an identical narrative form in all regions, or to what extent it resembled the version that we find, much later, in *Snorra Edda*. The limitations of visual art as a medium for the transmission of the myth are clear from these examples. At the same time, however, they do help to establish this story in the pagan period, and vouch for its age and authenticity. They prove, at the very least, that Snorri has not invented this myth from scratch.

THE EARLIEST TEXTUAL SOURCES

Thor’s fishing trip is also mentioned in skaldic poetry from the Viking Age: indeed, in some of the earliest Old Norse verse that has survived. This source, however, presents us with another set of problems. As I have detailed above, there is first the problem of transmission: although these poems are probably old and authentic, they have passed through many stages to reach the form in which they are now preserved. We have no way of knowing when their current form became fixed: at the time of composition, or only when they were finally written down. In the case of this myth, we are also faced with issues similar to those that accompany our attempts to interpret the Viking-Age picture stones. The earliest textual versions of this myth are non-narrative; they provide us with further glimpses into the tradition, but none of

them tells the whole story. In fact, some of them operate in a very similar way to visual depictions: they describe a single scene from the myth, but leave the rest of it untold. We can assume that their audiences knew a version of the whole narrative already, which would be called to mind by the poet's partial reference to it. Once again, however, we cannot know the precise form or forms in which the poet or his audience knew this myth.

The earliest skald whose verse survives is Bragi Boddason 'the old', a Norwegian who worked in the ninth century. Bragi's most famous poem is *Ragnarsdrápa* ('Poem about Ragnarr'), and it is in this text that we find his allusion to Thor and the serpent.[10] *Ragnarsdrápa* is a shield-poem. In this form of skaldic verse, the poet represents in words images that he has seen painted on the shields that hang around an aristocrat's hall: apparently this was a common form of interior decoration in the Viking Age. It seems that mythological scenes were a common subject of these shield images. Like the picture stones, these images are static, singular representations of a myth: there is no evidence that sequences of images were put together, like a cartoon strip, to give a continuous narrative. Unsurprisingly, Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* – though it provides us with more detail about the story than a pictorial representation can – presents us only with a static glimpse of one aspect of the myth, painting a picture in words of its climactic scene: the same one that was also the focus of the Altuna and Hørdum artists.

As we read it today, *Ragnarsdrápa* is a modern construction, a poem that has been spliced together from disjointed texts that are preserved only in *Snorra Edda*, where they occur separately and without regard to their narrative connections. Accordingly, when read in their manuscript context, they do not appear to be unified or necessarily coherent. However, the stanzas are clearly related to one another by their content, and it is easy to make a plausible reconstruction of the form in which the myth originally appeared in *Ragnarsdrápa* by comparing them to other versions of the story.

Bragi begins his poem by alluding to the fact that he is describing a tangible object that he has seen: 'It is shown to me [on the shield] that early on the son of Aldaföðr [Odin: his son is Thor] wanted to try his strength against the sea-lashed snake of the earth [Miðgarðsormr]'.[11] He has none of Snorri's preamble about Thor's journeys, his encounter with Hymir, or their preparations for the fishing trip. Rather, following this introduction, we are transported straight to the crucial scene of conflict:

> ‘Öflugbarði’s terrifier [Thor: Öflugbarði is probably a giant’s name, and Thor is the quintessential enemy of giants] lifted his hammer in his right hand, when he recognized the coal-fish that bounds all lands [Miðgarðsormr]’.[12]

The second stanza gives us a dramatic impression of Thor poised, his hammer ready for action: a dynamic pose caught in a freeze-frame. This verse is also typical of skaldic poetry in its use of kennings: Thor is referred to by a metaphorical construction that refers to one of his mythological attributes. In order to understand the phrase ‘Öflugbarði’s frightener’ as referring to Thor, Bragi and his audience must be aware of mythic traditions beyond this one story; they must recognize Öflugbarði as a name of a giant, and know of Thor’s important mythological function as the gods’ defender against the hostile giants.

The story continues in the same manner, the scene unfolding in successive vignettes. The next stanza says that:

> Viðrir’s heir’s [Viðrir is an alternative name for Odin: Thor is his heir] line was by no means slack on Eynæfir’s ski [Eynæfir is the name of a legendary sea-king, his ski is a ship], when Jörmungandr [another name for the serpent] uncoiled on the sand.[13]

The poet’s gaze shifts from above the water to below it:

> And the ugly ring of the side-oared ship’s road [sea] stared up spitefully at Hrungnir’s skull-splitter.[14]

> When on the hook of the old Litr’s men’s [giants’] fight-challenger [Thor: Litr is presumably meant to be a giant, although the name is given elsewhere to a dwarf] hung the coiling eel [Miðgarðsormr] of the Völsungs’ drink [poison] coiled.[15]

Our last glimpse of the scene finally takes in Thor’s companion, who does not want to see the snake brought to the surface:

> Breeze-sender [presumably Hymir, although the reference is obscure], who cut the thin string [his fishing line] of gulls’ Møre [the sea] for Thor, did not want to lift the twisted bay-menacer [Miðgarðsormr].[16]

Hymir’s cutting of the line, absent from the Altuna stone, regains its place in the myth, functioning to dispel the tension between god and monster that the previous stanzas describe so effectively.

Bragi’s poetry does not supply us with any new information about the myth, but it helps to confirm that the narrative was well known in the Viking Age, and suggests that it was pan-Scandinavian, familiar in Norway as well

as among pagans in Denmark and Sweden. It also illustrates very well how skaldic representations of myth differ from straightforward narrative versions. These stanzas are rich in mythological references beyond the basic story that they tell. Through his use of kennings that allude to, but do not explain, the protagonists' characteristics and relationships in the wider world of myth, Bragi gives us a tantalizing glimpse into the more profound traditions that must have been familiar to his ninth-century audience. Sometimes, we find it easy to follow him into the realm of the gods, as when he refers to Thor by calling him the son of Odin, or the giants' enemy. Plenty of other myths survive that prove these connections. Other references, however, are terribly obscure, and when – expecting to hear the giant Hymir mentioned – we hear Thor's companion called only 'breeze-sender', we realize how much of the rich background to Norse myth is now inaccessible to us. To make perfect sense of a poem like *Ragnarsdrápa* it is useful to know something of the myth of Thor and the snake from an external source; but we also need knowledge of the whole mythological complex that the poet apparently had at his fingertips.

A second shield-poem, the Icelander Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* ('House Poem', c. 985) is more straightforward than Bragi's. The kennings are simpler, and contain fewer references to external myths. Only four stanzas are devoted to Thor's fishing trip in *Húsdrápa*, which is also preserved in manuscripts of *Skáldskaparmál*. Úlfr's poem resembles the earlier text in its shifting focus between static images, and it contains some of the same images: Hymir (although he is not given that name) looking afraid; Thor and the snake exchanging hostile looks. But in the last of these stanzas the encounter ends in a new and surprising way:

> The most mighty fell-Gautr's [giant's] feller [Thor] made his fist crash on the reed-bed-bone [rock] frequenter's [giant's] ear. A mighty hurt was that. Víðgymnir of Vimur's fjord struck the ear-bed [head] from the shining snake by the waves. Within have appeared these motifs.[17]

Clearly, Thor hits somebody at this point in the story, as Úlfr tells it. It is unclear, though, who his victim – the 'explorer of the bone of the reed-bed' – is meant to be. This multi-level kenning could plausibly be taken to refer to either the serpent, or to Hymir. The 'reed-bed' is the sea; conventionally the 'bone of the sea' would be a rock, which grows up out of the sea bed to form land. According to well-established skaldic precedents, any figure that lives

on, in or among rocks may be assumed to be a giant. Thus we would probably expect this kenning to refer to Hymir, leaving us to conclude that Thor first strikes a blow against the cowardly giant, before ‘striking the ear-ground off the gleaming serpent’. It would seem to make more sense, however, if both sentences refer to the same incident, especially since none of the myth’s other versions have mentioned Thor’s fisticuffs with Hymir. ‘Explorer of the bone of the reed-bed’ can also be interpreted as ‘sea-serpent’: indeed it is quite an effective kenning, conjuring up an image of the mighty snake at the bottom of the ocean, exploring the rocky sea bed. In this interpretation, Úlfr’s kenning becomes more literal, and less conventional; but it still works.

If Thor strikes Miðgarðsormr, hitting its ear and possibly knocking its head clean off, the narrative resembles the ending of Snorri’s version of the myth, the one which his narrator has heard of, but doubts to be true: ‘some claim that he took the snake’s head right off’. Snorri knew *Húsdrápa* – it is preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* – and he presumably used it as a source for his version; but he appears to have had the same trouble that we have had in working out who Thor hits in the final stanza: he states that Thor may or may not have knocked Miðgarðsormr’s head off, but that he definitely did strike Hymir a blow on the ear. Snorri’s reading has influenced all subsequent interpretations of this part of *Húsdrápa*, but it is certainly possible that even he had some doubt about it. Úlfr’s poem adds a new detail to the myth’s tradition, one which is not found elsewhere among the earliest sources. When Snorri was faced with conflicting accounts of the same basic story, he would try to reconcile these variants with each other, but sometimes they are simply irreconcilable. Even though his knowledge of old poetry and its mythological background was vast, Snorri had no access to the myth in the form that Úlfr Uggason received it, but only in the form in which Úlfr recreated it and left it to posterity.

Úlfr was not the only poet who thought that this myth included Thor inflicting some degree of bodily violence on his adversary. A single stanza – presumably part of a longer poem, the rest of which is now lost – by Gamli gnævaðarskáld also includes this aspect of the story. Gamli is an extremely obscure figure, probably an Icelander who lived in the tenth century. Only two half-stanzas of his poetry survive, once again in *Skáldskaparmál*, and nothing else is known about him. His verse about Thor echoes the last stanza of *Húsdrápa*:

> While Bilskírnir's lord [Thor], who never nursed treachery in his heart, did quickly destroy the sea-bed-fish [Miðgarðsormr] with gorge-whale's [giant's] bane [the hammer, Mjöllnir].[18]

Here, Thor definitely does not smite Hymir. Unlike Úlfr, Gamli specifies that the god uses his hammer in the fight with the serpent. In context, the kenning 'destroyer of the gorge-whale' must mean Mjöllnir: although it sounds unlikely, a 'gorge-whale' – a very large creature who lives in a canyon – is a giant, since giants tend to inhabit mountainous, rocky terrain. And the grammar of the sentence requires that the 'destroyer of giants' be a weapon rather than Thor himself.

There are also three stanzas (composed c. 1000) attributed to Eysteinn Valdason, and a fragment of two lines on the same subject by Ölvir Hnúfa (possibly dating to the ninth century) that breaks off after saying that 'the girdle of all lands [Miðgarðsormr] became enraged, and the son of Jörð [Thor] . . .'[19] Eysteinn's verses, which are possibly part of another lost poem about Thor that has become fragmented over time, concentrate on the fishing itself, mentioning the line and hook, and the intensity of the struggle. It concludes with the line almost being ripped from Thor's hands, an element of the myth that is also in Snorri's version, but which we have not elsewhere seen in skaldic poetry:

> The coal-fish of the earth [Miðgarðsormr] responded thus, that Ullr's stepfather's [Thor's] fists banged out on the gunwale; broad planks pushed forward.[20]

We can assume that this was not the end of the story in Eysteinn's original telling of it.

Given the apparent popularity of the myth in the tenth century and earlier, it is strange that there are so few external allusions to Thor's fight with the world-serpent in other early skaldic poetry. In *Skáldskaparmál,* Snorri tells us that 'enemy of Miðgarðsormr' is an acceptable kenning for Thor, but the only verses that he cites in support of this usage are those already quoted above: stanzas which all describe the myth itself, rather than making reference to it in different contexts. Snorri's examples tell us why Thor might be called 'enemy of Miðgarðsormr', but they do not actually cite any instances of an older poet using this term. There is no evidence that 'enemy of Miðgarðsormr' was widely used as a way of referring to Thor the way that the 'enemy of giants' kenning appears to be universally recognized in the work of pagan-era skalds.

These skaldic poems provide us with useful evidence for the transmission of this myth in the pagan period. Taken together with contemporary pictorial sources, they enable us to establish that the story of Thor and the snake was known across Scandinavia, and that many of the elements of the narrative that we find in Snorri's version had been part of the myth's tradition for centuries. None of them, however, provides us with the whole myth. Occasionally, too, they differ from one another in the details they focus on. These differences might be explained in a number of ways. It is possible that there were several versions of the whole myth in circulation, each slightly different; or the myth may have existed in a relatively fixed and stable form, but each poet re-imagined it in his own way. Differences between the versions would therefore be down to artistic preference and poetic technique. Finally, the impression that these versions are different may be a false one because none of these poems survives in its complete, original form. All have been chopped about and re-arranged in the much later manuscripts that preserve them. It is possible that all of them originally told the whole story, and included all its component parts. Some of these elements may subsequently have been misplaced over the course of a long process of oral and then written transmission. All of these possibilities must be admitted, but none is more likely than the other. In any case, the differences within the skaldic corpus are much smaller than the differences between skaldic versions of the myth and their later parallels in the *Eddas*.

This case study reveals the strengths and limitations of skaldic verse as a source for Norse myths. Skaldic poems help to date, locate and authenticate myths within pagan culture; they allow us to hear pagan people speaking of their myths in their own voices. But owing to their non-narrative form – which is in part determined by the constraints of their complex form and style – they only reveal a myth bit by bit, one static image at a time. They always seem to presuppose prior knowledge on the part of their audience. To appreciate these poems fully, an audience needs both knowledge of this myth in particular – to provide the connections within the narrative that the poet does not make – and a wide knowledge of the mythology in general – to understand the references to other myths that appear in the kennings. Lacking that knowledge, we must turn to the evidence of much later, but fuller, versions of the myth to fill in the blank spaces that the skalds have left.

HYMISKVIÐA

The eddic poem *Hymiskviða* (‘Poem about Hymir’) is the classic and perhaps most authoritative version of the myth, by dint of its inclusion in the *Poetic Edda* manuscript. It appears in the main sequence of mythological poems, the last of a set of three stand-alone narratives that each tell an individual story about an adventure of one or more of the gods. (*Skírnismál* and *Hárbarðsljóð* are the other two.) But it is not given the title *Hymiskviða* in the Codex Regius. At the start of the text in this manuscript a scribe has instead added the phrase ‘Thor pulled up Miðgarðsormr’. A fourteenth-century manuscript, AM 748 quarto in the Arnamagnæan Collection, Copenhagen, has another copy of the poem, and the usual title of the poem is found for the first time there. This discrepancy between the two versions is interesting, as the conventional title seems to place the focus of the poem on the character of Hymir, while the Codex Regius places Thor’s exploits in the foreground in the way we would expect from reading other versions of the myth. While Hymir certainly has an important role to play, Thor is undoubtedly in the limelight.

Hymiskviða is also the longest variant of the Thor-Miðgarðsormr myth: it relates several events that are not recorded by Snorri. It is, however, badly preserved in both manuscripts, and often difficult to understand without relying on Snorri’s version as a guide. The poem makes one radical departure from all other versions of the myth by splicing Thor’s fishing trip with another of Thor’s adventures, a story that is not known from other sources. It begins with the gods trying to force *Æ*gir, a giant who is often associated with the sea, and is elsewhere said to be the gods’ brewer, to prepare their feasts. *Æ*gir is reluctant, but agrees on the condition that Thor should find him a cauldron that is big enough to brew ale for all the gods. The *Æ*sir are at a loss until Týr tells Thor that only Hymir, a giant who lives ‘at the end of heaven’, possesses a big enough vessel, one a whole league deep. Týr also states that Hymir is his father – a mythological detail that is not recorded anywhere else in the corpus, and which has struck many readers as unlikely. So Thor and Týr agree to go off and try to obtain the cauldron by trickery.

When they reach Hymir’s hall, they first encounter Týr’s grandmother, a nine-hundred-headed old hag, and his mother, an altogether more attractive woman. She suggests that the two of them should hide, since Hymir is often unfriendly towards guests, and he will be coming home soon. The *Æ*sir hide under a particularly large cauldron, one of many in the giant’s kitchen. When Hymir comes in from the cold, his wife tells him that his son has come to

visit, and brought Thor with him. *Hymiskviða* states that Hymir already considers Thor to be his enemy at this early point in the story; we do not know whether another myth at one time existed that explained this hostility, or whether it is just a reflection of Thor's traditional role as giant-killer. So furious is Hymir at his uninvited guest's presence, that his glowering glance breaks the hall's cross-beam in two, causing all the cauldrons to crash to the floor. All but one of them – the one in which the two gods are hiding, naturally – are smashed to bits.

The initial scene of confrontation between Hymir and Thor quickly gives way to a parodic scene of feasting. Three bulls are slaughtered, and boiled whole apart from their heads, which are discarded. Thor then performs one of the prodigious feats of appetite for which he is famous from other myths:

> Sif's husband [Thor] ate two before he went to bed, alone he ate two of Hymir's oxen. It seemed to the grey-haired playmate of Hrungnir [the giant] that Thor had consumed a considerable amount. (*Hymiskviða*, Stanzas 15–16)[21]

The giant says that they will need to go out the next morning to hunt for food sufficient to feed them all. At this point in the story, it is Thor who suggests that they might go fishing, if he could find some decent bait; the next part of the poem describes their journey, which is familiar to us as the myth of Thor and Miðgarðsormr. But it is not entirely familiar, as *Hymiskviða* seems to make several alterations to the 'standard' narrative.

Some elements remain the same: Thor decapitates one of Hymir's oxen to provide the bait; it is Thor who urges the giant to row out further and further to sea. *Hymiskviða*, however, makes the fishing trip an active contest between the two protagonists, a trial of their strengths. Hymir lands a blow against his opponent's complacency by hooking two whales at the same time; Thor's immediate and unsurpassable response is to catch the great world-serpent. But in contrast to the skaldic treatments of the myth and the Viking-Age picture stones, *Hymiskviða* does not linger over the struggle between the fisherman and his prey. Thor pulls up the serpent right away, and even manages to drag it up into the boat, where he attempts to deliver the *coup de grace* with his hammer:

> Then very bravely Thor, the courageous one,
> pulled the gleaming serpent up on board.
> With his hammer he struck the head
> violently, from above, of the wolf's hideous brother

[Miðgarðsormr, who is the brother of the monstrous wolf, Fenrir].
The sea-wolf shrieked and the underwater rocks re-echoed,
and all the ancient earth was collapsing. (*Hymiskviða*, Stanzas 23–24)

At this point, there is a gap in the manuscript, and the next thing the poem tells us is that ‘the fish sank into the sea’ – here, the snake undoubtedly survives its ordeal. We do not know how much of the narrative is missing; perhaps Hymir cuts the line as in other versions; as it stands, however, that action is missing, as is the terrifying scene of Thor staring directly into the monster’s face. Thor certainly does not knock Hymir out of the boat; the two of them row fairly peacefully back to shore, although the giant appears unhappy and does not speak until they reach land. Hymir’s cowardice is less explicit in this version than in Snorri’s; he has a more active role, instigating the trial of strength. But our impression of him is coloured by the absence of the line-cutting motif: if that element of the narrative was supposed to be part of the poem, the myth would resemble Snorri’s rather closely. As it is, no conclusions can be drawn.

Hymiskviða, though, does not end with the conclusion of the fishing episode. Once ashore, Hymir begins to test Thor’s strength and prowess again. First, he challenges Thor to carry a whale (memorably described as the ‘giant’s sea-pig’) to the farm, or else to drag the boat up on shore. Thor, of course, does both, picking up whale and vessel and carrying them both unaided over a high ridge to Hymir’s home. ‘And still the giant’ – says the poem – ‘strove with Thor about his strength’. He challenges Thor to break his precious crystal goblet. Thor thinks he is equal to the challenge, and smashes the cup against the hall’s roof-pillar. The pillar breaks, but the goblet does not. It takes the intervention of Hymir’s wife before Thor passes the test. She advises him that Hymir’s own skull is harder than any cup, and Thor dashes the goblet against his head; it shatters into pieces.

Although *Hymiskviða* has not told us up to this point that Hymir knows about Thor and Týr’s original mission, his final challenge to them is to take away the giant ale-kettle, if they are up to it. Týr tries, but cannot move it. But Thor bowls it down the hall on its rim, like a child’s hoop, picks it up and carries it out on his head. The myth concludes with the journey of the two gods back to Asgard with the cauldron; it is not without incident, but the poem becomes rather perfunctory in its final stages. In two stanzas we learn that Hymir and a ‘many-headed army’ are in pursuit, but that Thor kills all the giants. (Including, presumably Hymir: Týr’s reaction to the slaughter of

his father is not recorded.) Then one of Thor's goats (who pull his chariot; these animals are mentioned briefly towards the beginning of *Hymiskviða*) drops down dead, apparently because of something that another god, Loki, had done to it. This part of the story seems inexplicable; once again, the poem may now lack material that it originally contained. We know the story of Thor's goats, however, from *Snorra Edda*; what is alluded to in the poem is narrated in full only in Snorri's prose. Thor's goat is presumably a sad loss to him, but this version of the myth ends on a positive note: the Æsir have their cauldron, and henceforth are able to drink their fill at Ægir's feast each winter.

Hymiskviða takes the main details from the myth's tradition and places them within a different narrative framework: one that is not found in any other source. Thor's fishing expedition becomes part of a sequence of episodes that all test his strength against the giant's. The story of *Hymiskviða* is typical of the most common myth-type that features Thor as its protagonist; we find several examples of the type in *Snorra Edda*, in the eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, and in the tenth-century skaldic poem *Þórsdrápa*. But whereas these other sources treat Thor's encounter with the world-serpent as a single myth, *Hymiskviða*, uniquely, combines it with other stories to make one coherent larger narrative. This raises the question of *Hymiskviða*'s relationship to the other surviving versions. Presumably, *Hymiskviða* is either a conflation of two different, though similar, stories – the quest for the giant's cauldron and the struggle with Miðgarðsormr – or a text that preserves the fullest version of the myth, of which the other sources give edited highlights. Since *Hymiskviða* is a relatively late poem, which resembles most closely *Snorra Edda*'s version of the myth, the first of these options is more likely. Snorri seems to have combined details from the skaldic poems that he quotes from in *Skáldskaparmál* with the basic structure of the myth as he knew it; the poet of *Hymiskviða* may have taken a similar approach, finding connections between similar stories and combining them to make a new one. *Snorra Edda* confirms that both component parts of the *Hymiskviða* narrative were known elsewhere, but the poem stitches them together in a way that Snorri does not. In fact, we have no knowledge of any other source that combined Thor's adventure in Hymir's halls with the Miðgarðsormr myth. It is therefore difficult to assess whether it is the culmination of a long tradition, or an entirely new creation.

CONCLUSION

Before we even begin to think about what the myth of Thor and the snake *means*, we must decide what it *is*. Should we interpret the story without regard to the differences between its variant versions, or should we take them into account? Do these variations provide us with an insight into the meaning of the myth, or do they obscure it? Many critical approaches to myth have been founded on the premise that myth is fundamentally stable, and its meanings universal and eternal. The French anthropologist and pioneer of the structuralist study of mythology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, went so far as to deny that variations between different versions of a myth had any real significance: 'we define the myth', he wrote, 'as consisting of all its versions . . . a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such'.[22] Clearly, we are dealing in this case with the same myth in all our sources; but to disregard the differences between them and to look only at their commonalities is to deprive them of their historical context. Versions of this myth survive from a period that spans perhaps half a millennium, and which traverses the most important cultural shifts in Scandinavian history: the transition from paganism to Christianity, the introduction of the Roman script and the rise of literacy, and the transformation of oral traditions into written texts. It is reasonable to assume that as time went on and the cultural situation in Scandinavia altered, the myth of Thor and Miðgarðsormr meant different things. It remained important enough to be remembered, passed on and written down; but it may have been important for different reasons to different people. I would agree with Lévi-Strauss that the quest to find the 'original' form of a myth is both impossible and unhelpful; but myths can change while remaining mythic. They are recreated afresh with each new telling, and each stage in a myth's transmission is also a transformation.

This case study shows that this approach is not without its difficulties. Different sources from different periods reveal very different amounts and types of information. In the Viking-Age picture stones from Sweden and Denmark, we have versions of the myth that are undoubtedly old, and certainly pagan. But the nature of the picture stone as a medium restricts what it can tell us: these earliest versions of the myth are incomplete, static and non-linear, and without recourse to later textual comparanda they would probably mean very little to us. They speak with the authentic voice of the pre-Christian Viking Age, but they speak a language that we can barely

understand. To a lesser extent the same can be said of the Norwegian and Icelandic skalds whose ninth- and tenth-century poems paint word-pictures of scenes from the myth without ever telling us the whole story. Unfamiliar as we are with their language, poetic idiom and the full breadth and depth of the traditions within which the skalds worked, we are left with pieces of a puzzle that never seem to join up. There are correspondences between the poetic and pictorial representations of the story that survive from the Viking Age, which may help us to identify which of its component parts are most likely to be genuinely old; but we would be unable even to explain these elements without resorting to much later, narrative versions of the myth. We do not share the mythological frame of reference that Scandinavian pagans must have possessed, passed down in stories told for generations, by which they would have been able to make sense of the skalds' allusions, or reconstruct a whole narrative from a single image. Instead, we find an interpretative context for the early versions only by reading them in the light of later versions. We require an interpreter in order to understand the language of pagan myths.

For the myth in question, we have two such interpreters. Snorri Sturluson, as is so often the case, is one candidate. His version of the myth is an amalgamation of material drawn from different sources, some known to us, some perhaps unknown. He has processed the information from these sources into a cohesive, coherent whole, which he expresses as a straightforward and effectively told prose tale. His version loses most of the ambiguities seen elsewhere in the tradition, but Snorri was himself aware of the variability of the myth: witness his uncertainty about whether the serpent is killed or not at the end of the story. Then there is *Hymiskviða*, which appears to be another late re-working of the myth. Unfortunately, we do not know the date of this poem, or whether it has any direct relationship with *Snorra Edda*. Like Snorri, *Hymiskviða*'s author gives us the whole story; but it is not the same story. Both the late accounts place this myth within a wider narrative of Thor's ongoing adventures among the giants; but they do not put it in the same place in the sequence, or make the same connections between this story and other myths. They use the same material, but they do different things with it. Snorri's account is more coherent, owing to the poor state of *Hymiskviða*'s text in the manuscripts, but we must be wary of calling Snorri's the better version, or choosing it alone as the basis of an investigation of the whole. But nor should we give special value to *Hymiskviða* simply because of

its poetic form and its presence in the most important medieval collection of mythological poetry. We must acknowledge that both versions are literary texts, each the self-conscious re-expression of inherited material in a different literary mode. They are each the product of one author writing in and for his own present who is at the same time involved in a dialogue with a tradition that carries with it the stories his ancestors told: stories told in and for very different times.

2

The Gods on the Ground: Religious Culture as a Background to Pagan Myth

One of the most straightforward definitions of myth states that it is a type of story that deals with the actions of gods, rather than people. As myths are interested in gods, it stands to reason that these stories must bear some relation to religion – to what myth-makers believe and the forms of worship that they practise. According to some schools of thought, myth is thus a type of religious narrative directly connected to the rituals by which societies express their devotion to a deity, attempt to influence their world through the invocation of supernatural powers, and seek to transcend from their earthbound existence into the realm of the divine.

In the first half of the twentieth century, this idea was promoted by the so-called ‘Myth and Ritual’ theorists. These scholars thought that they could identify the process by which ritual was turned into myth (or vice versa: even within this ‘school’, people found it hard to agree). For example: suppose a society places great importance upon the land’s fertility, and marks the changing seasons with special ceremonies that are designed to ensure that the cycle of life will continue over the coming year. The transition from the dead of winter to the land’s reawakening in spring, summer’s plenty and the decay of autumn, marked with their appropriate festivals and rites, quite naturally suggests a story of birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. As a way of explaining the society’s rituals, or remembering them, or simply because this pattern appealed to their imaginations, myth-makers began to create stories based upon the same cycle. A hero – normally a god – is created to personify

the force of fertility, and stands at the centre of a narrative that follows the basic *birth – death – rebirth* pattern of the ritual year. The story makes the idea that underlies the rituals more concrete in people's minds, and strengthens associations between divine powers and human concerns. The Egyptian god Osiris is one of the most famous examples of this pattern. Myths about Osiris concentrate on his defeating death by being re-born. Evidence that Osiris historically was worshipped as a fertility god appears to strengthen the Myth-Ritual link in this case: his triumph over death has often been interpreted as symbolizing the annual fertility cycle of the seasons. Similar figures are found in similar stories in the mythologies of many different cultures.

As times change, and with them people's religious priorities and practices, some rituals fall out of use. According to the 'Myth and Ritual' theory, while societies forget their old rituals and the reasons why they once performed them, they tend to remember the stories that accompanied them – the myths. This type of narrative has the power to persist beyond the death of its religious function. Myths would therefore preserve traces of much older religious practices, like fossils in stone. Many scholars have thought that it should be possible to chip away at the myth until we release the original ritual from its matrix, and in this way locate the origins of the story in very ancient forms of ritual. This approach has never been *proven* to be successful in uncovering a myth's religious origins, however, and it often demeans the artistry of the myth.

An alternative way of looking at the connection between myth and religious ritual is to invert their relationship. Perhaps myth came first, and rituals arose in imitation of elements of the myth; the performance of ritual would allow people to participate symbolically in the myth. A famous example of this process is the Christian ceremony of the Eucharist. In the story of the last supper, Christ told his disciples that by eating bread and drinking wine they would partake of his divine body and blood. This narrative – which we might well call a myth, since it is undoubtedly concerned with the actions of a god – explains why Christians to this day take bread and wine as part of one of their most solemn and significant rituals. In all probability, here the myth came first. The last supper is re-enacted every Sunday in churches across the world, allowing congregations to participate in a story that brings them closer to Christ and places them directly within the power of his divinity: at the climax of the ritual of the Eucharist, Christians

become symbolically one with their deity. Without its underlying myth, the ritual would lose this power; without the ritual, the myth would remain in the realm of story.

It is rarely possible to make such certain connections between any particular myth and ritual in pagan Norse culture, although the 'Myth and Ritual' theory remains influential among some scholars working with Scandinavian material. But it is clearly true that Norse paganism had its rituals as well as its myths, and that in some cases religious practice may have influenced the form of the myths; without doubt, religious *belief* also has had an important role in shaping stories about the gods. The Norse myths, however, should not automatically be assumed to be a straightforward expression of religious sentiment. As we shall see, very few of the stories in question lend themselves to a simple religious interpretation. Myth and religion are always to some extent related, but they are not at all the same thing.

In this book, pagan religion is not the main focus of my investigation, but it provides an essential part of the backdrop against which the Norse myths tell their stories. As we will be concerned with tales that were told about the Norse gods, we need to know something about the role that these gods played in people's lives and their position in people's worldviews. We must also consider the nature of pagan Norse society, and what functions religion had within it. This chapter therefore provides a brief overview of religious belief and practice in pagan Scandinavia in the period before the earliest surviving myths were produced.

THE GERMANIC CONTEXT

In the earliest observable phases of its history, Scandinavia was part of the wider cultural and religious network that Roman writers like Tacitus called *Germania*. The northern European tribes who spoke Germanic dialects – the inhabitants of continental Germany, Frisia and Denmark, the Scandinavian peninsula, and the Anglo-Saxon settlers in Great Britain – were linked by more than the similarities between their languages. At some stage, the same gods were known and worshipped across this whole region. The best evidence for this comes from the names of the week in the various Germanic

languages.[1] Thor is commemorated by Thursday, *Donnerstag* in German, *torsdag* in modern Danish, and so forth. The fifth day of the week bears the name of the goddess known in Old Norse as Frigg (a development of an earlier Germanic deity named Friga): Friday, *Freitag*, *fredag*. These names are very ancient, and attest to the worship of the same range of major deities across the whole region: the other two are Tiw (the Old English name for the god known as Týr in Old Norse) and Woden (equivalent to Odin), although modern German does not preserve an equivalent to our Wednesday (= 'Woden's day').

Scandinavian paganism grew out of this common religious-cultural heritage, gaining a specific identity for itself over time. No myths survive directly from the common-Germanic cultural epoch, although doubtless it produced some. There is, however, some evidence about what the ancient Germanic religion was like. By taking evidence from a number of different locations, historians of religions have been able to reconstruct the type of paganism that was practised across northern Europe in the late Iron Age. These reconstructions create an image of a pan-Germanic religion that is purely hypothetical: they gloss over the differences between regions and blur chronological distinctions, making it hard to discern change and variety within these systems. Probably no Germanic pagan of the late Iron Age would have recognized his own religion among this scholarly guesswork. Having said that, the evidence for Scandinavian paganism before about the sixth century AD is so thin that this comparative method is, for want of a better alternative, an essential tool for understanding the nature of the early religions of the North.

Archaeological evidence is particularly important for the study of early religious practice. As we saw in Chapter 1, however, archaeologists almost always require some kind of key provided by a written source to unlock the significance of some of their more obscure finds – and religious artefacts tend to be particularly difficult to identify. Precisely because religious paraphernalia is often so strange and inexplicable, there has been a tendency among archaeologists to label anything that they have dug up but cannot identify as having a possible religious function. But when dealing with both religious practice and mythological narrative, it is best to only label a piece of evidence as 'religious' if we can really connect it with the religion in question after careful comparison with different types of evidence.

The starting point for almost all discussions of early Germanic religion is

Tacitus's *Germania*, which was written at the end of the first century AD. Tacitus wrote about the habits, customs and way of life of the various tribes that lived around the northern edges of the Roman Empire, and his perspective is very much a Roman one. He had little first-hand experience of these barbarian peoples, but seems surprisingly sympathetic towards them. He tends to dwell on what he considered the praiseworthy aspects of Germanic culture, possibly in order to show how 'decadent' Roman society might be improved by imitating its less 'civilized' neighbours. Working in an established Classical tradition of ethnography, Tacitus looks at both the common features that unite the Germanic tribes and the differences between groups in different parts of Europe. We do not know how much faith to place in his testimony – we have no way of knowing where he got most of his information – but his work is of the utmost importance because of its comparative perspective. Above all, we rely on Tacitus simply because there are so few written sources for the study of Germanic culture in the Roman and post-Roman periods.

Tacitus tells us both about the Germans' gods and their modes of religious observance. He confirms, first of all, that Germanic religion was polytheistic – many gods were worshipped in different ways and to different ends – and that it was basically universal among the Germanic peoples, although subject to minor local variations.

> Above all other gods they worship Mercury, and count it no sin, on certain feast-days, to include human victims in the sacrifices offered to him. Hercules and Mars they appease by offerings of animals, in accordance with ordinary civilized custom. Some of the Suebi sacrifice also to Isis. I do not know the origin or explanation of this foreign cult; but the goddess's emblem, being made in the form of a light warship, itself proves that her worship came in from abroad.[2]

The most notable thing about this passage is that Tacitus uses the familiar names of Roman deities to refer to the Germans' gods – clearly these would not actually have been in use in Germania. Tacitus uses what is called the *interpretatio romana* ('Roman interpretation') to enable his audience of educated Romans to understand the identity of these gods by relating to them to those with which they were already readily familiar. Mercury is equivalent to the Germanic Woden (the Norse Odin): in Latin, the third day of the week was named *dies mercuri* (Mercury's day: compare also French *mercredi*), just as Woden is commemorated in Wednesday. On the basis of his presentation in Old Norse sources, Odin does not much resemble the Roman Mercury; but

these sources are of course centuries later than Tacitus's account, and it is quite possible that the two gods were more similar to one another in earlier periods. Tacitus states that the Germans honoured Mercury with human sacrifices, and though, as we will see, Odinic human sacrifice was probably a rarer phenomenon in pagan Scandinavia than many historians have suggested, people were indeed sacrificed to Odin.

Tacitus's Mars is normally identified with the Germanic god Tiw (or Týr in Old Norse). Both deities are connected to warfare, although in Scandinavia Týr's association with the battlefield seems to have weakened quite considerably in the later pagan period. Once again, evidence in support of their mutual identification can be taken from the days of the week: the second day of the Roman week was called *dies marti* (Mars's day). For the Germans, as we have seen, the same day was assigned to Tiw. Tacitus's 'Hercules', meanwhile, is usually identified with Thor (whose common Germanic name was Þunor). Here, though, the days of the week do not help us: the Romans commemorated Jove (or Jupiter) on 'Thor's day'. Hercules was not, strictly speaking, a god at all, but a semi-divine hero, the son of Jupiter. He was, however, widely venerated across Europe and, according to Tacitus, was admired particularly by the Germans:

> The Germans, like many other peoples, are said to have been visited by Hercules, and they sing of him as the foremost of all the heroes when they are about to engage in battle. They also have the well-known kind of chant that they call *baritus*. By the rendering of this they not only kindle their courage but, merely by listening to the sound, they can forecast the issue of an impending engagement.[3]

Hercules's emblem was a club, and amulets representing this weapon survive from the second and third centuries AD from across the Roman Empire. It is notable that Thor is also characterized by his use of a blunt weapon, in his case the hammer. Historians have proposed that the cult of Hercules spread across Europe during the Germanic migrations in the fifth and sixth centuries, and that the club was a precursor of Thor's hammer, the two figures having gradually melded into a single god. Among Tacitus's Germans, Hercules was apparently also related to warfare: in Norse mythology, Thor often plays the role of a warrior-god, although it was Odin who was the principal god *of* warfare in Scandinavia, to whom people looked for success in battle.

There are significant differences between the Norse god Thor and his Roman equivalent, therefore. It is impossible to tell whether these differences

arise out of Tacitus's own interpretation of their equivalence, or because the two figures and their significance to pagan people changed over time. It is certainly noteworthy that Tacitus does not state that the Germans worshipped Jupiter, the Roman deity who in many ways most closely resembles Thor. Both these gods control thunder, and both are commemorated on the same day of the week. It is generally accepted that both Jupiter and Thor derive from a single, extremely ancient thunder-god who was worshipped across the pre-historic Indo-European region. But Tacitus does not make this association, which leads us to question the precise nature and role of Hercules/Thor in late Roman Germania, and to wonder how much this god has changed over time and in different parts of Europe.

Tacitus also mentions that the Suebi – whom Tacitus believed to occupy the whole of the Baltic coast of Germania, all the way into modern-day Lapland – worshipped Isis. Isis was a fertility goddess whose cult spread from Egypt across the whole ancient world. She was sometimes identified with the Roman goddesses of agriculture, Demeter and Ceres. Her most likely equivalent in the Germanic pantheon is probably Frigg or Freyja, both of whom have well-attested associations with fertility: the two separate goddesses in the Scandinavian pantheon may have developed out of a single deity who was worshipped in Germania, although there is little solid evidence for this. Tacitus regards the Germans' veneration of Isis as a ritual imported from abroad, but he unfortunately provides no detail beyond stating that sacrifice – presumably not of humans – formed part of her worship.

The Suebi comprised several sub-tribes, and in a famous passage Tacitus states that some of these peoples worshipped a goddess known as Nerthus, and describes the peculiar religious ceremonies associated with her cult:

> There is nothing noteworthy about these tribes individually, but they share a common worship of Nerthus or Mother Earth. They believe that she takes part in human affairs, riding in a chariot among her people. On an island of the sea stands an inviolate grove, in which, veiled with a cloth, is a chariot that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her with deepest reverence as her chariot is drawn along by cows. Then follow days of rejoicing and merrymaking in every place that she condescends to visit and sojourn in. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away.[4]

After Nerthus has made her tour among her followers, she returns to the sacred grove, and the idol that represents her in the temple as well as her chariot and clothing are ritually washed by slaves in a certain lake – the

slaves are then immediately drowned.

This account is remarkably detailed in its description of how Nerthus was worshipped by a combination of priest-led ceremony, purification ritual and sacrifice, but it does not tell us *why* she was worshipped – what benefits she was believed to bring to the lives of the community. Perhaps she was also a fertility goddess, as Tacitus's reference to her as 'Mother Earth' suggests. If so, she may be related to the Norse fertility gods known as the Vanir; her name resembles Njörðr, the sea-god who is the father of Freyr and Freyja according to some of the myths. It is possible that at some time between Tacitus's day and the Scandinavian Viking Age, the goddess had undergone gender re-assignment as she turned into Njörðr, or else that Nerthus was his female equivalent in early Germanic religion who had lost her separate identity over time. In any case, it is significant that some of the Suebi – who inhabited a region not all that far from Scandinavia – apparently had a goddess as their main deity, and performed human sacrifices to her, rather than to the Mercury/Woden figure who was preeminent in the religious life of other Germanic tribes.

So Tacitus tells us that there were at least four main deities among the pagan Germans, but that different tribes held different gods in their highest regard, depending upon the priorities their own culture placed upon the gods' various functions. The goddesses Isis and Nerthus were associated with fertility, while Hercules and Mars were more closely connected to warfare. The god he names as Mercury was apparently the most important figure in the Germanic pantheon, but Tacitus provides little information about him.

We also learn something about the nature of Germanic religious practice from Tacitus. He treats pagan religion as a social phenomenon: he does not discuss how individual people would have perceived the gods, or whether they thought of themselves as having a personal relationship with their preferred deities. Religion was organized, at least to an extent. Priests were a recognized caste within society, and were thought to have direct access to the gods themselves: Tacitus says that they regarded themselves as the 'servants of the gods'.[5] Priests presumably, therefore, had a position of influence and honour in their community. These priests led rituals in which sacrifice was a key component of worship. Occasionally, people – specifically, in the case of Nerthus, slaves – were the victims of these rites, although Tacitus seems to suggest that human sacrifice was not the norm, but was reserved for the most important gods and their most solemn festal occasions.

At times, Tacitus seems to contradict himself. He mentions a temple in his description of the cult of Nerthus among the Suebi, and says that the goddess herself is believed to attend these ceremonies, but elsewhere he states that the Germans

> do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only be the eye of reverence.[6]

The impression we get is that most religious ceremonies took place outdoors, and that trees, woods and sacred groves held a particular religious significance throughout Germania.

Finally, Tacitus places great emphasis on the Germans' interest in auguries and fortune-telling, and gives a religious dimension to predicting the future:

> For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is always the same. They cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time, and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them . . . they have also a special method of their own – to try to obtain omens and warnings from horses. These horses are kept at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves that I have mentioned: they are pure white and undefiled by any toil in the service of man. The priest and the king, or the chief of the state, yoke them to a sacred chariot and walk beside them, taking note of their neighs and snorts.[7]

Tacitus explains the curious belief that horses could predict the future by stating that the Germans thought these sacred horses were directly 'privy to the gods' counsels'. But he does not speculate about the extent to which the gods determined the course of future events or controlled people's fates.

Since, according to Tacitus, the gods (with the peculiar exception of Nerthus) are abstractions – with neither form nor substance, even in the pagans' imaginations – they have no life beyond their place in peoples' worship of them. They do not, in other words, have a mythic existence, so far as we can tell from Tacitus. He records no stories about the Germanic gods, endows them with no personalities or even distinctive identities. A Roman audience, of course, would have known enough about Mercury or Mars or Hercules to fill in a mythical back-story for each god – but one that presumably would reflect Classical, rather than Germanic, traditions. Tacitus

shows us only one side of the myth-ritual coin; there is no place for myth in his ethnographic study.

The *Germania* does, however, provide us with a reasonably solid starting-point for our attempts to gain an overview of the religious background to the myths of pagan Scandinavia. It now remains to be seen to what extent other types of evidence support his account. For the next several hundred years, written descriptions of Germanic paganism are extremely scarce indeed. We therefore have to rely upon the evidence of archaeology, iconography and place-name studies. We should remember, though, that disagreement between sources of differing types, dates and geographical provenance does not necessarily indicate an error in an individual source, since pagan religions were susceptible to change and variation. In the next section, our focus will move further north, as I try to identify more closely the distinctively Scandinavian varieties of paganism.

THE GODS OF THE NORSEMEN

Our first task is to identify which gods were known and worshipped in pre-Viking Scandinavia. As I discussed in Chapter 1, archaeological evidence on its own can tell us quite a lot about religious practice, but relatively little about religious belief. Without the support of written evidence, it is often practically impossible to be sure that an object that we think represents a god really is a god, and still less a particular god. If no myths about Thor and his hammer had ever been written down, we would not know to identify an iconographic figurine holding a hammer as Thor. And since so many written sources post-date archaeological finds from the early pagan period, we must be wary of automatically ascribing the same mythological or religious significance to sources whose similarities may be observed but whose relationship cannot be confirmed. Archaeology is often able to support or cast doubt upon the accuracy of written sources, but it cannot replace them altogether.

Another type of evidence about paganism in medieval Scandinavia exists that is neither a posterior written source nor a physical remnant of the period: place-names are perhaps the most important source for confirming the presence of individual deities in the earliest observable phases of pagan

Norse religion. When the name of a town, village, farm or geographical feature bears the name of a pagan god, we must assume that this god was an important part of the religious life of the community that lived there. As place-names with pagan elements were no longer coined after the conversion to Christianity, we can also be sure that such a name genuinely dates back to the pagan period. It is not always possible to provide a precise date for the imposition of a name onto the landscape, but archaeological evidence can sometimes provide confirmation of the age of the settlement. Place-names also tend to be stable and long-lasting, although many have no doubt disappeared over time: they certainly do not give a complete picture, but broadly speaking they are likely to provide an accurate reflection of patterns of belief or worship across pagan Scandinavia. These patterns reveal a great deal of regional variation: some gods were undoubtedly more popular in different areas than others.

Some place-names across Scandinavia are connected to pagan religion through a word that denotes a place as the site of religious activity, although these are relatively rare. Such names contain elements like *–vé*, *–horg*, or *–hof*, all of which are usually translated as 'temple' or 'sanctuary': very often it is impossible to tell whether they refer to a building dedicated to worship or to an un-built sacred site in the landscape. Odense in Denmark is the most famous example of a name of this type: its current form has developed from 'Odin's *vé*' – the combination of a god's name and a word denoting a cult site confirms the strong pagan associations of this place.

Since Tacitus tells us that the Germanic peoples performed their rituals outside, it does not come as a surprise that many pagan place-names in Scandinavia refer to geographical features through elements like *–lundr* ('grove'), *–eke* ('grove of oak trees'), *–vangr* ('field'), or *–akr* ('cultivated field'). These elements on their own are not necessarily religious, but they are often combined with a god-name, as in (for example) Frøslunda ('Freyr's grove') or Torseke ('Thor's oak-grove') in Sweden. Unfortunately, we can tell little about the relationship between the gods and these special locations from the names themselves. They may denote places of worship; they may have been dedicated to a god by an individual pagan or a community; or they may have been thought in some way to be the place where the god or goddess actually dwelt. The latter possibility may be more likely in the case of those place-names that combine an element that names the god with a more generic, non-religious element, like *–staðir* ('place' or 'dwelling'): was

Torstad (‘Thor’s place’) in northern Norway a place where people performed rituals in honour of the god, or could it have been imagined to be his actual home? We have no way of telling, but there are several places in Scandinavia that bear names deriving from Old Norse *guðheimr*, which simply means ‘home of the gods’. This name suggests that at some point pagan people had believed that their gods shared their land with them – much as Tacitus claims that the Suebi thought that they could actually interact with the goddess Nerthus in a physical form.

By no means all the Norse gods are represented in these ‘theophoric’ place-names. (‘Theophoric’ simply means ‘referring to a god’.) Although they attest to a wider range of deities than Tacitus mentions, there are many gods – both major and minor – whom we know from mythology, yet who are entirely absent from the pagan landscape. We find Odin and Týr; the fertility gods Njörðr and Freyr; Ullr or Ullinn – who had become rather obscure by the time the myths came to be written down, and about whom we know little, although he is represented as a god of hunting in later sources; Thor; and possible traces of the goddesses Freyja and Frigg. Significant figures from Norse myth for whose worship there is no place-name evidence at all include Loki, Baldr, Heimdallr, Höðr and all the other goddesses. The pantheon is larger than the Germanic one in Tacitus, smaller than the fully developed mythological version of the eddas. Clearly, the Germanic pantheon was not identical to the Norse, and the range of gods known in Scandinavia was subject to change over time. It is possible that those gods who are absent from the place-name record did not have an active cult in the period in which names given to places and geographical features became fixed – in any case, some gods were clearly more significant to more communities than others.

There is also significant variation in the geographical distribution of the different gods in place-names. Most strikingly, perhaps, Týr – who, in the guise of Mars, was included as a god of war in Tacitus’s description of the Germanic pantheon – is found regularly in southern Scandinavia (particularly in present-day Denmark), but hardly appears at all further north. Odin, another war-like god, is also significantly more prevalent in Danish place-names than in Norwegian ones.[8] In Norway, those deities associated with fertility and agriculture – principally Thor and Freyr but also including Freyja and Njörðr – are each found in place-name elements about twice as often as Odin. The obscure god Ullinn, meanwhile, is the most widely represented member of the pantheon in south-central and western Norway, but is not

found in place-names anywhere else in Scandinavia. So concentrated are place-names relating to Ullinn in this part of the country that they distort the figures for the whole region, giving the impression that in pagan Norway he was three times more popular a god than Odin. In fact, the case of Ullinn simply illustrates how significantly patterns of belief and cult could vary between different parts of the region. It also shows that it is sometimes difficult to identify the correct god in a place-name: Ullinn is often regarded as being a variant form of Ullr, who is known from both Norwegian and Swedish toponomy, but is never found in Denmark. Did the Ullinn-worshippers of southern and western Norway worship a different god, or the same god under a different name? People undoubtedly knew about a range of gods, but individual communities aligned themselves with a particular deity, and worshipped him or her on the basis of their social and cultural priorities, which were partly geographically determined. There was a common pantheon, but there were also local gods for local people. The contrast between northern and southern Scandinavia – between the Norwegians who favoured Thor and the Vanir fertility gods and the Odin- and Týr-worshippers of Denmark – is quite marked, and has never been satisfactorily explained. The Norwegian scholar Else Mundal notes that:

FIGURE 7 Distribution map of place-names containing theophoric elements relating to gods primarily associated with warfare and royal power: squares indicate Odin- names; circles indicate Týr- names.

FIGURE 8 Distribution map of place-names containing theophoric elements relating to gods primarily associated with agriculture and weather: circles indicate Freyr- names; crosses indicate Thor- names.

> The frequency of a god's name in the toponymic material may probably [. . .] be somewhat influenced by conditions connected with [the] history of settlement. The name of a god who was particularly popular during a certain period may be expected to be most frequent in the toponymic material in those regions where many new farms were found during the period.[9]

So the Týr- place-names of Denmark reflect the popularity of Týr's cult at a time when settlements were being established and acquiring the names that stuck with them over time. When the same process occurred in Norway, Týr had either mainly been forgotten or else had not risen to prominence. Conversely, the cult of Freyr, which is well attested by Norwegian place-names, had either faded out of currency in Denmark or else never had much

significance in that area. Freyr and the other fertility gods are clearly most relevant to communities who lived in close contact with the land – subsistence farmers and fishermen, for example. War-gods like Týr and Odin, on the other hand, are more likely to be attractive to warrior groups. I would hypothesize that fertility cults in Scandinavia were older than the worship of the war-gods, and that therefore the Danish place-name evidence indicates that, at the period when these names crystallized, society and religion had developed further towards a warrior culture in Denmark than in Norway. Denmark, too, was much closer to the other areas of Germanic Europe, and liable to be influenced more readily by Continental beliefs, practices and attitudes. We remember that when Tacitus wrote, many of the Continental Germans already worshipped the equivalents of Týr and Odin, whereas the Suebi at that time were notable for their worship of the fertility deity Nerthus. As we shall see, an increasing interest in the aristocratic warrior-god Odin is one of the most notable developments in the Norse myths as they take shape in the ninth and tenth centuries, reflecting changing social and cultural circumstances in Norway particularly.

Place-names from eastern Scandinavia – the areas that make up modern Sweden – give a more mixed picture of the pagan gods worshipped there. According to this evidence, Odin's cult achieved widespread distribution in Sweden, but the fertility god Freyr (so rare in Denmark) is also represented in many place-names, particularly in the middle of the country. The pagan Swedes were also often especially associated with both Freyr and Odin in later written sources.

Thor, meanwhile, appears in place-names throughout Scandinavia, with particular clusters around Oslo fjord in Norway and in the eastern part of Sweden. Though some are difficult to interpret securely, many of these Thor-names are found near to the coast: as a god of wind and weather, he might have been an appropriate choice of patron for communities who relied on the sea for their livelihood. Thor- was also an extremely popular element in Old Norse personal names, both for men (Þórsteinn, Þormóðr, Þórir, etc.) and women (Þórbjörg, Þórdís) across Scandinavia. His cult seems to have been widespread, and not restricted to any one area or ethnic or social group.

Place-names present us with certain problems when we try to use them as a source of information about pagan religion. They are subject to change, and by the time they come to be recorded in medieval documents, their spelling has often altered greatly: in Old Danish, for example, the Odin- name-

element is often *Von-* or *On-*. In Norway, there are several places that include *Tot-* as their first element: while it is possible that this represents a local variation on *Tor-* (for Thor), it is impossible to say for sure whether the red-bearded god really was worshipped there. Sometimes, too, a place with a Thor- element may be named after a person and not the god at all, because *Thor-* was such a common element in personal names. Even where we find *Thor-* combined with a second element that seems to refer to a place of worship or other holy site, it may refer to a priest or land-owner rather than directly to the god. (However, a theophoric first element with the name of a god other than Thor, when combined with a word denoting a religious site is highly likely to refer to the deity worshipped in that place.) Finally, we must always remember that the toponymic record is incomplete: there were doubtless many more theophoric place-names that have not survived, and without the full picture we should be cautious regarding absolute statements about the geographical distribution of the various gods' cults. The distribution patterns discussed above are often suggestive, but rarely conclusive.

These concerns do not outweigh the value of this type of evidence, however. Theophoric place-names are authentic survivals from the pagan era, and are more likely to represent accurately which gods were actually worshipped before the conversion than most written sources. And, because they preserve the gods' names, they provide us with an unparalleled insight into the gods as the focus of religious belief among different groups of pagans. On the other hand, place-names tell us little about *how* the gods were worshipped, or *why*. We need to understand these other constituent parts of the Norse religious system if we are to gain a complete picture of what the gods meant to people, how they related to them, and what they thought they would gain from their relationships with divinities. In order to establish what pagans *did* about their religion, we will now turn to archaeological evidence.

IDENTIFYING THE NORSE GODS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

As discussed in Chapter 1, archaeology provides unrivalled access to pagan Scandinavians' way of life; undoubtedly, too, traces of their religious

mentality may be discerned from the material record. But archaeology is a frustrating source that depends to a great degree upon corroborating external evidence if it is to provide a reliable insight into religious behaviour. Archaeologists have exhibited an often unfortunate tendency to interpret unidentified objects as having a possible role in an unknown religious ritual; every burial or cremation is evidence for attitudes towards the afterlife; any unusual high-status building might be a temple; any figurative image found in a pagan-era grave must represent a god. The fact of the matter is that uncertainty is endemic to the archaeology of pagan religion, and over-interpretation a constant temptation that we should try to resist.

Without a certain amount of imagination, however, it is often impossible to make a connection between the Norse gods and the traces of apparent ritual that have turned up in excavations. And since this chapter is concerned with religion as a background to mythic narratives about gods, rather than purely as a social phenomenon, we need other evidence to help us bridge the gap between what pagans did and what they believed. Unfortunately – but perhaps not surprisingly – the Norse gods are often conspicuous by their absence from archaeological excavations, even when we can identify the excavated site or its artefacts as having some sort of religious function.

Thor is the god most frequently represented in Viking-Age iconographic artefacts. Several seated figurines with prominent beards, resembling the Eyrarland image from Iceland (as discussed in Chapter 1), have been found across the Viking world and are thought to represent Thor. Most significantly, however, Thor's hammer pendants are easily the most widespread religious symbol from the period. About fifty such pendants in silver have been found; their distribution is centred on southern and central Scandinavia, but they are found as far afield as Iceland, northern Norway, England and Poland. The silver pendants are probably quite late, having become fashionable in the tenth century; earlier, though fewer, examples of Thor's hammers in iron, bronze, or amber are also found.[10] These objects probably served as amulets, worn as good-luck charms or to protect the wearer from danger. They do not have a discernible role in pagan rituals, although some (about ten per cent of the total) have been found laid on top of cremation urns, which suggests that they may have had a place in burial ceremonies. Where Thor's hammers are found in graves, they are more likely to be the resting-place of a woman than a man. The silver Thor's hammer pendants of the later period may have been a pagan reaction against, or partial

imitation of, Christians' practice of wearing a cross as an amulet, which also became popular in the tenth century. A fascinating artefact from Trengården in Denmark reveals how closely these two religious symbols may have co-existed. It is a soapstone mould for casting amulets, in which Thor's hammer and the Christian cross sit side by side – the artisan who made the amulets must have had clientele in both religious communities.

The relatively high number of artefacts relating to Thor seems to confirm the place-name evidence in suggesting that his cult was widespread and popular in the Viking Age, and probably earlier. The cult seems also to have gained strength and flourished over time, even as it came into contact with Christianity. But neither the images of the god nor his hammer-amulets reveal much about what function Thor had in the lives of his followers or how his worship took place. It seems likely that he was important as a protective figure, but we do not know whether he was thought to grant protection from specific threats like ill-health or bad weather, or if he kept people safe more generally.

The other pagan gods are represented extremely rarely in artefacts, and are difficult to identify with any certainty. Where Thor's attributes – his beard and his hammer, his fight with Miðgarðsormr – are well established in both mythology and the archaeological record, the iconographic identification of other gods is often problematic. Freyr is a case in point: he is associated with fertility through his kinship with the Vanir family of gods, and the medieval historian Adam of Bremen mentions in his description of the pagan temple at Uppsala that 'Frikko' was worshipped there in the form of a statue with a very large phallus.[11] The connection between fertility and phallic imagery is obvious and well established. But this connection has also led scholars automatically to equate every figure bearing an erect penis to Freyr /'Fricco': the Rällinge figurine from Sweden is perhaps the most famous example. This figure sits grasping his beard, wearing a pointed hat or helmet and displaying his phallus rather brazenly. Ever since its discovery, the Rällinge image has been identified as Freyr, who as we have seen was widely venerated in Sweden. The archaeologist and historian of religion Neil Price, however, has pointed out how flimsy the evidence upon which this identification is based really is.[12] Price notes that none of Freyr's attributes as we know them from the myths – his sword, his boar, his ship – are represented in this image; the pointed helmet, which is usually regarded as designating a god, might be part of a warrior's or king's accoutrements. And the phallus, an obvious symbol

of the figure's sexual potency, might also fit in with those other gods in the pantheon – Odin or Loki, for example – who exhibit conspicuous prowess in this department in the myths. It might be a giant, elf or dwarf, all of whom are portrayed with very active libidos in later stories; or perhaps simply it is a portrait of a man famous for his manhood and manliness. Even if we regard the erect penis as representing fertility in its most general senses, rather than human sexuality, there are other gods besides Freyr who are connected to fertility. If we disregard the penis, we might note that the figure's pose, as well as his headgear, resemble Thor's in the Icelandic Eyraland image: might it not also be a symbol of a god's masculine power as well as a token of his fertility? Scholars have been so quick to interpret this figurine in the light of Adam of Bremen's account – which in so many other respects seems quite unlikely – that they have failed to take into account any possible alternative explanations for this statue's distinctive form.

Images connected to Odin are rare, but include the Lindby figurine (discussed in Chapter 1) and the so-called 'weapon-dancer' on a die from Torslunda in Sweden, both of which clearly have one eye missing. (It is noteworthy that this strikingly Odinic image was found at a place – Torslunda – whose name seems clearly to indicate that Thor was the main god worshipped at that site.) Beyond these isolated examples, which clearly show a known and unique attribute of the god, most of the images that have been associated with Odin are simply representations of warriors – with whom his cult was of course particularly associated. But an image of a warrior may be just that, without any religious connotations. We know, too, that Odin was not the only god associated with warrior groups: in Denmark, Týr was also widely culted, but he is nowhere clearly identifiable as the subject of an iconographic artefact. Odin's characteristic weapon was the spear, and miniature spearheads are sometimes found in Swedish graves, leading some scholars to identify an element of Odin-worship in the ceremonies surrounding burial. While this interpretation is possible, a spear could equally symbolize the bravery and prowess of a dead warrior, independent of a direct association with the god. Finally, Odin is also connected to the valkyries, who in the myths serve as his hand-maidens, choosing dead warriors to join him in Valhalla. On the basis of this connection, there has been a tendency to identify any female figure on an artefact found in a grave as a valkyrie: it is supposed that these objects were supposed to symbolize the dead person's passage to Valhalla, or helped

ensure it. Yet these so-called valkyries are most often found in women's graves – the graves of people who would *not* go to Valhalla, which was reserved for the bravest and mightiest of (male) fighters.[13] These female figures are sometimes depicted holding a cup. From the myths we know that one of the roles played by the valkyries was to serve mead or beer in Valhalla; but high-status women were also expected to honour their guests with drink here on earth. This depiction could, in other words, relate to a perfectly ordinary aspect of a woman's life, rather than to the hyper-masculine cult of Odin.

FIGURE 9 Torslunda 'weapon-dancer' with one eye.

We have already discussed how difficult it is to connect most archaeological finds directly with Norse myths; they are likewise ambiguous, frustrating and unreliable sources of evidence about religious practice in the pagan period and the gods themselves. Because such artefacts survive with so

little context about their use in situ, we are left to interpret these images on the basis of what we *think* we already know about Norse paganism and its deities. Sometimes, this approach works very well; more often, over-imaginative responses to such enigmatic objects have been unhelpful in our attempts to place the gods in proper religious, social and cultural perspective.

RITUAL: THE GODS IN PRACTICE

Tacitus tells us that the Germanic peoples refused to confine their gods to temples, preferring to venerate them at special sites in the landscape. The archaeological evidence seems to support this statement: so few temple sites have been found as to lead many scholars to accept that the ritual activities of pagan cults went on in the open air. It is of course difficult to identify and excavate these open-air cultic sites, or to know what objects we should expect to find there.

Adam of Bremen's famous description of a grand pagan temple at Uppsala, written in the eleventh century, seems to contradict Tacitus's account, however. Adam certainly believed that the Swedes had established cult-centres with actual buildings wherein icons of the cult were housed:

> That folk [i.e. the Swedes] has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan – that is, the Furious – carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his sceptre apparently resembles Jove.[14]

Although Adam's account is second-hand at best, it ties in quite well with the other evidence so far assembled about the functions of the different gods – Thor is associated with the weather and agricultural fertility, Odin (Wotan) with war and Freyr (Frikko) with sexuality, a different aspect of fertility cults. We might note, too, that Adam makes use of the *interpretatio Romana* as Tacitus had done many centuries before, relating the Norse gods to the

classical deities known to him through Latin literature.

Archaeologists were eager to find Adam's temple at Old Uppsala, and extensive excavations have been carried out there. Until quite recently it was thought that the presence of post-holes beneath the existing floor of the church revealed that Christians had overbuilt their new place of worship on top of the old cult site. Archaeologists now accept that the building whose traces remain beneath the church was in fact a hall of some kind; there is no clear evidence to identify it specifically as a cult site.[15] If rituals did take place indoors at Old Uppsala, it seems likely that they happened in a chieftain's home: this seems to contradict Adam's idea that the pagan Swedes had a whole building – rather like a Christian church, or a Roman temple – given over to worship. An addition to one of the manuscripts of Adam's history, however, notes that many of the most important festivals at Uppsala still took place outside:

> Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted.[16]

Recently a few 'cult houses' (a term which is preferred over 'temple' as it carries fewer loaded connotations) have been identified in Sweden: at Borg in Östergötland, Sanda in Uppland and Lunda in Södermanland, for example. None of these buildings is nearly as impressive as Adam would have us believe Uppsala was. Their identification as cult sites rests upon the presence of iconographic artefacts, which are taken to represent gods, and evidence of sacrifices or burial rituals. At Borg, for example, archaeologists have found several of Thor's hammer amulets, along with a high concentration of dog, horse and pig bones. It is rare to find so many bones from dogs and horses in a Viking-Age settlement, but it seems that these animals were particularly likely to be sacrificed in pagan rituals. However, these finds are located *outside* the building that has been identified as the 'cult house', in which there is nothing that definitively reveals it to be a religious building. The site at Lunda, which is dated to c. 450–600, may originally have been a sacred grove, since that is what the place-name means. The small building found there has also been called a 'cult house' because two small figurines with erect phalluses, perhaps representing a fertility god like Freyr, were found nearby. A third figurine appears to represent a hanged man, possibly the

victim of a sacrificial ritual. There is also a cemetery close to the building, where cremated remains have been found.[17] Although neither iconographic artefacts nor mortuary remains necessarily prove the presence of cultic activity at a particular location, taken together they do seem to suggest that some form of ritual probably did take place in or around these buildings, whether or not we should think of them as temples in the usual understanding of the word.

Of all the phenomena connected to pagan religious activity in Scandinavia, sacrifice seems to be one of the most important and also the easiest to spot in the archaeological record. Tacitus records that the Germans dedicated human sacrifices to Mercury and 'more lawful offerings' to Mars, Hercules and Isis. Adam of Bremen, meanwhile, describes the sacrifices that took place at Uppsala in shocking terms:

> For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wotan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Frikko. It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden . . . The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men. A Christian seventy-two years old told me that he had seen their bodies suspended promiscuously. Furthermore, the incantations customarily chanted in the ritual of a sacrifice of this kind are manifold and unseemly; therefore, it is better to keep silence about them.[18]

The churchman Adam, of course, does not keep silent about these disgusting pagan rituals. Once again, his description rings rather false in places: it seems unlikely that the nine-yearly major sacrifice would really have served as a general convocation for all the provinces of Sweden – there is no external evidence that pagan cults were so organized or centralized as this suggests. But we have no reason to doubt the basic information that Adam gives us about sacrifice in pagan Scandinavia: the gods were worshipped through offerings ranging from the pouring of ritual drink to animal slaughter to human sacrifice. Broadly speaking, archaeological evidence confirms that these types of rituals did take place. It is rarely possible, however, to associate a particular sacrifice with the cult of a particular god, with one exception: sacrifices to Odin, though uncommon, display certain markers which allow us to identify them with some certainty.

Sacrifices are identified by a number of factors that distinguish them from normal burials. Archaeologists sometimes assume that mass graves, or large groupings of the remains of cultic animals like horses or dogs, indicate a large-scale sacrifice similar to the nine-yearly sacrifice at Uppsala that Adam of Bremen mentions. While this interpretation may be valid in the case of significant deposits of animal bones in a particular location – especially if there are any other signs of cultic activity in the vicinity – human sacrifice is less certainly identified by the presence of multiple bodies in a single gravesite. Epidemics of disease, for example, might well lead to such multiple burials, or family groups could deposit the remains of their members in one grave over a number of years.

If the inhabitant of a grave who appears to have died of natural causes is accompanied by another figure who met a violent end, it seems reasonable to assume that the victim was selected to accompany the deceased person in death – and probably, although not certainly, into some sort of afterlife. Examples of these dual graves have been found at Birka in Sweden, where a young man's decapitated corpse has been placed on top of an older male who was buried with his weapons and elk antlers; at Lejre in Denmark, another two men, one of whom was bound and decapitated, are found together. This practice was not confined to male graves: at Gerdrup near Roskilde in Denmark a woman's grave also contains the body of a man with a broken neck. No evidence connects these ritual killings to the cult of any particular Norse god.

More detail about this type of sacrifice is found in the famous account of a cremation ceremony among the Scandinavian Rus on the banks of the river Volga, which was written by an Arabian diplomat named Ibn Fadlan around 921. According to Ibn Fadlan's description:

> When their chieftain dies, his family ask his slave-girls and slave-boys, 'Who among you will die with him?' and some of them reply, 'I shall. ' Having said this, it becomes incumbent upon the person and it is impossible ever to turn back. Should that person try to, he is not permitted to do so. It is usually slave-girls who make this offer.

In the funeral that he describes, a slave girl who volunteers to die with her master is elevated to a position of honour and given special clothing and drink. Preparations for the ceremony take ten days, during which time the dead man remains in his 'grave' (although it is not clear whether Ibn Fadlan

means that he had been fully buried for all that time). A special shelter is constructed on the river bank, and the warrior's ship drawn up beneath it. On the tenth day, the ceremony proper begins:

> Then the ship was hauled and placed on top of this wood. They advanced, going to and fro [around the boat] uttering words which I did not understand, while he was still in his grave and had not been exhumed. Then they produced a couch and placed it on the ship, covering it with quilts [made of] Byzantine silk brocade and cushions [made of] Byzantine silk brocade. Then a crone arrived whom they called the 'Angel of Death' and she spread on the couch the coverings we have mentioned. She is responsible for having his [garments] sewn up and putting him in order and it is she who kills the slave-girls. I myself saw her: a gloomy, corpulent woman, neither young nor old.
>
> When they came to his grave, they removed the soil from the wood and then removed the wood, exhuming him [still dressed] in the *izār* in which he had died. I could see that he had turned black because of the coldness of the ground. They had also placed alcohol, fruit and a Pandora beside him in the grave, all of which they took out. [. . .]
>
> They carried him inside the pavilion on the ship and laid him to rest on the quilt, propping him with cushions. Then they brought alcohol, fruit and herbs and placed them beside him. Next they brought bread, meat and onions, which they cast in front of him, a dog, which they cut in two and which they threw onto the ship, and all of his weaponry, which they placed beside him. They then brought two mounts, made them gallop until they began to sweat, cut them up into pieces and threw the flesh onto the ship. They next fetched two cows, which they also cut up into pieces and threw on board, and a cock and a hen, which they slaughtered and cast onto it.
>
> Meanwhile, the slave-girl who wished to be killed was coming and going, entering one pavilion after another. The owner of the pavilion would have intercourse with her and say to her, 'Tell your master that I have done this purely out of love for you.'[19]

Several elements in this description seem to tie in with archaeological evidence about Scandinavian burial customs – the high-status dead man has his weapons alongside him, and dogs and horses are also sacrificed and their remains placed in the ship. The sexual element to the ritual, however, is not tangible in any Viking-Age burial that has been excavated. That is not to say that it could not have featured in other similar rituals, but it is not the sort of practice that leaves much of a trace in the archaeology.

Finally, the slave girl is entrusted to the 'Angel of Death', who conducts her to the ship, whereupon another six men have sex with her before she is laid beside her master, then stabbed and strangled simultaneously. Meanwhile, the men who remain outside the ship bang sticks against their shields, making a great noise so that 'her cries could not be heard and the other slave girls would not seek to escape death with their masters'.

There is no mention of a god in Ibn Fadlan's account, but there is one element to the ritual that suggests some connection to what we might call a

mythic outlook on death. The presence of grave-goods, animals, food and of course the slave-girl all suggest that part of the purpose of the rite was to ensure that the deceased had a comfortable journey to the afterlife. The slave girl confirms that the Rus believed in an afterlife when she participates in a peculiar ritual immediately before taking her place onboard the ship:

> At the time of the evening prayer on Friday they brought the slave-girl to a thing that they had constructed, like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and was raised above that door-frame. She said something and they brought her down. Then they lifted her up a second time and she did what she had done the first time. They brought her down and then lifted her up a third time and she did what she had done on the first two occasions. They next handed her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it away. They took the hen and threw it on board the ship.
>
> I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, 'The first time they lifted her, she said, "Behold, I see my father and my mother." The second time she said, "Behold, I see all of my dead kindred, seated." The third time she said, "Behold, I see my master, seated in Paradise. Paradise is beautiful and verdant. He is accompanied by his men and his male slaves. He summons me, so bring me to him."'[20]

We might note that the girl was probably rather drunk by this point in the proceedings. But here Ibn Fadlan does connect the ritual aspects of the burial with the prospect of a future life in some sort of 'paradise'. Whether this picture is representative of Scandinavian paganism more generally – it may have been specific to the Rus, even though elements of the cremation are paralleled elsewhere in the North – is unclear, as is the possible connection of this ritual to the cult of a god. In this instance, sacrifice served the dead chieftain as a symbol of his honour and wealth, as well as in providing him with a companion for the afterlife. It was not directed explicitly towards a deity. The role of women in this ceremony, as both victim and as leader of the ritual, is notable, but is probably not representative of most cultic activity in pagan Scandinavia, which as far as the evidence shows was mainly the preserve of high-status males.

Although the religious connotations of the Volga boat-cremation are uncertain, the use of ships in burial rites, and within them the deposition of grave-goods, is well attested elsewhere across the Viking world. At Kaupang in Norway, a remarkable boat-burial has been discovered in which a man, woman and baby lie adjacent to each other, near the remains of a horse and a dismembered dog. A second woman occupies the stern of the boat, perhaps acting as its helmsman. The grave is full of high-status accoutrements, mainly associated with the woman in the stern – weapons, jewellery, a bronze

cauldron and a strange metal staff are found by her corpse.[21] Scholars have hypothesized that this figure may be a sorceress: as she symbolically 'steers' the ship into the afterlife, we might also see traces of Ibn Fadlan's 'Angel of Death' in this figure. She is clearly of great significance in this burial ritual, but there is no evidence that she was killed to accompany the couple in the floor of the boat, or vice versa. Similar patterns of boat inhumation are found at Klinta on the Swedish island of Öland, and in the very famous, high-status Oseberg ship burial from Norway.

Only one explicit account of Viking-Age burial customs in Scandinavia survives in an Old Norse historical text. It occurs in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, which concerns the deeds of the gods before they became gods: in Snorri's view, Odin, Freyr and Njörðr were legendary historical kings of Sweden, whose remarkable exploits and unprecedented skills and success as leaders formed the basis for their cults. While Snorri does not mention the use of ships in pagan mortuary practice, several of the details he does provide seem to chime with the archaeological evidence and with Ibn Fadlan's description of the ceremony on the Volga:

> In his country Odin instituted such laws as had been in force among the Æsir before. Thus he ordered that all the dead were to be burned on a pyre together with their possessions, saying that everyone would arrive in Valhalla with such wealth as he had with him on his pyre and that he would also enjoy the use of what he himself had hidden in the ground. For notable men burial mounds were to be thrown up as memorials. But for all men who had shown great manly qualities memorial stones were to be erected; and this custom continued for a long time thereafter.[22]

Snorri's account was written long after these practices had died out in Scandinavia. It is probably based partly upon his knowledge of literary traditions concerning Odin, death and Valhalla, and represents a learned rationalization of his source material. But there is no need to reject it outright: Snorri's passage is not contradicted by the available archaeological evidence. It is also important in providing the only explicit link between funerary traditions among the pagan Scandinavians and one of their gods. It helps to bridge the gap between religious history and myth.

In Norse myths, Odin is the god who is always most closely associated with death. The material evidence of pagan religious practice is less conclusive, but there are some signs that Odin was indeed associated with certain types of death and with human sacrifice in particular. Only by combining the information in mythic sources with the archaeological

evidence are we able to build a full picture of the importance of the Odin-cult in pagan attitudes towards death, dying and sacrifice.

Odin is particularly associated with death by hanging on the basis of a famous passage in *Hávamál*, a poem that is found in the *Poetic Edda*. The date of its composition, like all such poems, is uncertain. We do not know where it comes from, and it is difficult to understand its purpose, in part because in its present form it appears to be a combination of three different mythological poems that are linked by the figure of Odin. The title *Hávamál* means 'speech of the high one', and Hár is an alternative name (one of many) by which the god was known. It does not tell a single story, in the manner of many of the eddic poems; rather, it is a loose collection of proverbs, advice and apparent references to magical and religious practices.

In Stanza 138 of *Hávamál*, Odin describes his 'auto-sacrifice': a ritual in which he was both victim and recipient of his own offering:

> I know that I hung on a windy tree
> nine long nights, wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
> myself to myself,
> on that tree of which no man knows from where
> its roots run.[23]

The tree on which Odin hangs himself is the world-tree, Yggdrasill: the name, which means 'Odin's horse', may refer to the god's 'riding' the tree during his nine nights hanging there. The spear is one of Odin's most characteristic attributes, and it may have had a special place in Odinic rituals. Snorri Sturluson certainly thought it did. At another point in *Ynglinga saga*, he once again makes a connection between Odin and the afterlife, and suggests that pagans would ritually mark themselves with a spear in order to ensure that they went to join the god in his pagan 'paradise':

> But when he felt death approaching he had himself marked with the point of a spear, and he declared as his own all men who fell in battle. He said he was about to depart to the abode of the gods and would there welcome his friends. So then the Swedes believed that he had gone to the old Ásgarðr and would live there forever. Then the belief in Odin arose anew, and they called on him.[24]

In the late *Gautreks saga*, King Víkarr is similarly hanged and punctured with a spear, and his executioner says, as he dies: 'Now I give you to Odin'.[25]

Snorri's account resembles *Hávamál* in that in both cases Odin performs a ritual upon himself. The purposes of the two rituals are very different,

however. While the pseudo-historical Odin of the Swedes plans to gain a place for himself among the gods after his death, the mythological Odin in the poem gains occult wisdom and magic powers from his time on the tree:

> No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
> downwards I peered;
> I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
> then I fell back from there.[26]

Immediately afterwards, Odin says he has learned nine ‘mighty spells’ and taken a drink of the mead of poetry, which was thought to be the divine source of inspiration for Norse skalds. Odin’s hanging on Yggdrasill, therefore, grants him his mastery of runes, magic and poetry – all of which were somewhat interrelated in Norse culture, and all closely associated with Odin; it was not necessarily part of a ritual complex associated directly with dying.

The mythical association between Odin and human sacrifice has led archaeologists to attribute many corpses that they identify as sacrificial victims to rituals connected to his cult. But while death by hanging was a relatively common phenomenon in Iron Age and Viking Scandinavia, not every hanging was part of a religious rite: it was also a common method of judicial execution. Criminals were not, we may assume, supposed to go to Valhalla after being strung up for their misdeeds. Men who were killed with a spear – the other main ‘Odinic’ way of dying – might have fallen in battle: it is usually impossible to tell whether a spear wound was inflicted upon a sacrificial victim or an active warrior. A spear found in a grave alongside a dead man similarly may represent his warrior status, rather than his religious affiliation. Only if a corpse shows signs of having been both hanged and stabbed might we be absolutely sure that we have found a sacrifice to Odin, and no certain examples of this mode of this ritualized double killing have yet been found in Scandinavia. In other cases, sacrifice is strongly suggested if the dead person was bound before meeting a violent end, and especially if the corpse appears to have been treated with honour and respect. Once again, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that such an individual was executed for non-religious reasons. And, although writers ranging from Tacitus to Snorri strongly associated Odin with human sacrifice, we cannot rule out the possibility that other gods also received this type of offering at times.

If archaeology reveals only a limited amount about the connection between Odin and human sacrifice, there is one intriguing object that seems to speak to it more directly. In a scene on a picture stone at Lärbro Stora Hammars on Gotland, Sweden, there are multiple iconographic clues that some kind of Odinic sacrifice ritual is taking place. The stone as a whole appears to be a monument to Viking warrior culture. In its bottom panel is a splendid longship; there are two battle scenes – one on land, over which Odin's bird, the raven, presides, and the other a confrontation between landsmen, one carrying a flaming torch, and the crew of another Viking ship. In the second panel from the top, a man is hanging from a tree, while a bearded warrior in the centre of the image appears to hold down another, smaller figure. He holds a spear, as if ready to strike his captive with it. Meanwhile, the other warriors wave their swords, perhaps in excitement or religious fervour. There are two large birds in this scene, which again probably represent Odin's ravens. The triple triangle symbol in the centre of the panel is often called a *valknut*, although this is not an Old Norse word, but a modern invention of unclear provenance. It has been interpreted as a distinctively Odinic symbol, since in similar images it tends to accompany pictures of warriors in similar images, among whom Odin was probably the chief object of worship, at least during the Viking Age.

FIGURE 10 Picture stone from Stora Hammars, Gotland, Sweden (probably eighth century). The apparent sacrifice scene appears directly below the possibly Odinic 'Valknut' symbol in the third panel from the top.

Odin himself is not present in the Lärbro Stora Hammars image, but there are sufficient elements present to suggest that it was produced in an environment where Odin's cult was established and vital. Human sacrifice was probably part of the religious life of the community whose culture this monument represents. But even in a source whose religious dimension seems to be so easily interpreted, we do not get the full picture of how Odin-worshippers conceived the relationship between their god, death and the afterlife. If this panel does represent human sacrifice, were the victims offered as gifts to the god, as in Adam of Bremen's description of the rites at Uppsala? Or were they – as the other sources suggest – sacrificed in imitation

of Odin's own self-sacrifice, in order to become closer to him and perhaps ensuring their progress to an afterlife with him in Valhalla? It might be noted that there is no specific evidence of a belief in Valhalla discernible in archaeological or other remnants of pagan material culture. As we shall see in Chapter 3, myths about Valhalla seem only to have become fully developed in the later Viking Age, as a result of new trends in poetry that arose alongside an increasingly dominant and self-conscious aristocratic warrior class. Only by combining the full range of evidence available to us from archaeology, history and myth do we get a full picture of Odin's role as a god of death. But this picture may well not represent how this god was actually perceived by his followers at any given point in history: it is a mosaic made up of many different fragments, glued together with a lot of scholarly interpretation and conjecture.

CONCLUSION

The example of Odin's connection to human sacrifice shows how Old Norse myth and religion can help to explain each other. Indeed, without taking both sides of the myth and ritual complex into account, we would not be able to understand either aspect. However, it is not possible to say for certain whether the myths have grown up in imitation of religious practices or vice versa. We do not know if pagans began to sacrifice people to Odin because they knew the myth of his own self-sacrifice, or if the myth was created in order to explain the significance of ritual acts that they were already carrying out. It is also extremely difficult to discern the aims behind these rituals – what people thought they stood to gain from them. As we begin to look at the myths themselves in more detail we will see that the same problems continually arise: the evidence about pagan religion is often so scarce, and the gap between the myths and their original religious contexts so great, that is difficult to discern how they might have functioned as part of a god's cult. In all probability, some of these myths never did have a direct association with pagan religious practice.

At the same time, the evidence collected in this chapter reveals several important things about Scandinavian paganism. It was polytheistic: different people and communities venerated different gods for different purposes, but

we can assume that they also had some knowledge of other gods in the pantheon besides the deity who was the focus of their main cultic activities. Scandinavian paganism had a genetic connection to the wider religious system of the Germanic Iron-Age tribes, although it was not necessarily identical with the religions that Tacitus describes at the end of the first century.

Place-name evidence reveals the range of gods who were most prominent in pagan religion: Odin, Thor, Týr and a group of deities associated primarily with fertility. Many of the gods who play significant roles in the Norse myths, however, are absent from place-names, leading us to doubt that they were ever the object of their own cults. Place-names clearly reveal, too, that there was substantial geographical variation in the worship of different gods, and that Norse religion was by no means homogenous.

The gods are rarely visible in the archaeological remains of religious practice, but this category of evidence can tell us something about the nature of pagan ritual. According to several written sources, sacrifice – of animals, foodstuffs or occasionally humans – formed an important part of pagan ceremonies, and it is occasionally possible to use archaeological evidence to identify examples of this type of ritual, although it is difficult to establish their precise form or goal. It seems likely that the majority of rituals took place outdoors, and that features of the landscape often held particular significance for different cults. We do not know much about how religious cults were organized, or whether there was an established priesthood, although external evidence suggests that a community's political leaders often attended to its formal religious needs. Rites connected to the burial of the dead were a very important part of people's religious life, but it is often difficult to associate matters of belief with the physical remains of funerary ritual that archaeology reveals.

The 'Myth and Ritual' interpretation often fails to explain Norse myths precisely because it is so difficult to observe and interpret the practices by which pagan people fulfilled their religious obligations, and still more difficult to connect these practices to what they believed or how they conceived of their gods. Making the leap from scattered and fragmentary evidence about pagan religion to the myths – where the gods appear fully-formed and larger than life – is often problematic. We must always remember, as we turn to the myths themselves, that the stories that people told about the gods of the pagan north are just that – stories – and not

unmediated expressions of religious belief. Nor have they arisen unconsciously out of long-lost rituals. There is no doubt that pagan religion is the soil out of which Norse myth has grown. But before the myths can blossom into their full finished glory, they must be fertilized and tended by generations of poets and writers, who prune a branch away here or there, or graft one story onto another in order to produce a more dramatic effect. In the chapters that follow, we will trace the growth of Norse mythology from tiny shoots in the Viking Age into its fullest flowering long after Scandinavia had been converted to Christianity.

3

Myths in the Viking Age: Norway, Iceland and Beyond, c. 850–950

As we have seen, traces of Norse mythology in the archaeology, artefacts and art of the late Iron Age and Viking Age in Scandinavia are fairly hard to find. The evidence that provides us with knowledge about the pagan religions of the North – itself incomplete and sketchy – does not reveal much regarding the place of stories about the gods within people's belief systems and ways of life. Yet there is no doubt that people did know and share the Norse myths, for when the oldest surviving Old Norse poems were composed, poets already had a wide range of myths at their disposal. Visual artists, too, had already begun to carve scenes from the myths on stone. Unfortunately, we do not know in what form these myths circulated: we can only see what Viking-Age artists made of them. But the skalds who drew on mythological narratives from the ninth century onwards were part of a tradition that was vibrant, vital and presumably quite ancient. At this point, myth was probably an oral form of story-telling, most likely transmitted through poetry: the oldest surviving skaldic poems not only have a store of myths to draw upon, but also a well-defined repertoire of poetic techniques. So, although ninth-century skaldic poetry may appear innovative as a conduit for mythic information, this impression arises only because no older poems have survived.

THE MYTHIC FATHER OF OLD NORSE POETRY

Bragi Boddason ‘the old’, as I discussed in Chapter 1, has long been regarded as the father of Old Norse skaldic poetry. Of course, this is another false impression: undoubtedly there were other skalds before Bragi. But his fame as a pioneer in this type of poetry is long-standing: medieval writers considered him important as a very early and very famous practitioner of this artform. He shares his name with the Norse god of poetry, and it is possible that he lent his name to this deified Bragi, who appears in poetry from the mid tenth century onwards. (There is no evidence for the god Bragi having been venerated within Norse religion: he is purely a mythological, rather than a cultic, god.) It is hard to imagine a more prestigious honour for a traditional poet than to be elevated into the pantheon as a god of poetry and patron of his successors. Even if the similarity between the god’s name and the poet’s is accidental – the name Bragi may derive from *bragr*, a word for ‘poetry’ in Old Norse – it helps to create an association between two figures who serve as emblems for the art of traditional poetry in Scandinavia.

The ‘historical’ Bragi is hardly more historical than his divine namesake, however. It is very hard to reconstruct his life from the existing sources, and all the verse that currently bears his name is only attributed to him in much later manuscripts. Scholars agree that he was from Norway, and that he lived in the ninth century, although his precise dates are unknown. According to *Skáldatal*, a comprehensive list of Norse poets that is found in a manuscript of *Snorra Edda* from around 1400, Bragi worked at the courts of the Swedish rulers Ragnarr loðbrók (‘Hairy-Breeches’), Eysteinn beli (‘Belly’) and Björn at Haugi. Ragnarr, who may have ruled Denmark as well as much of what is now Sweden for a brief period in the 860s, is particularly associated with Bragi because Snorri Sturluson claims that Bragi composed the shield-poem *Ragnarsdrápa* (discussed above) in his honour.

On the basis of the evidence about Norse pagan religion that we reviewed in Chapter 2, we might expect Bragi, as a pagan of Norwegian stock who worked in Sweden, to know of many different gods. Depending on his position in society, as well as his place of origin, he might have mainly worshipped a god like Odin, Thor, or Freyr. Of course, the mythological content of his poetry might also depend upon his patrons: Ragnarr loðbrók, for example, claimed to be descended from Odin (at least according to almost certainly spurious poems attributed to him in the much later saga that tells his life story). Bragi might well have thought it prudent to mention his lord’s favourite god in poetry whose mundane purpose was to ensure that the skald

got paid. At the same time, we should remember that mythological poetry is not the same as *religious* poetry. When a skald mentions a particular god in his verse, it does not mean that he was a member of that god's active cult; if he fails to mention a god, it does not necessarily mean that the god was unknown or deprecated by the poet and his audience.

We have already seen that Bragi had a particular interest in Thor's exploits. His six stanzas about Thor's fishing trip and battle with the snake show detailed knowledge of this myth, and may be a remnant of a longer poem that was entirely dedicated to the god's adventures. Another stanza that is attributed to Bragi also refers to Thor, albeit in an extremely obscure manner:

> Well have you, cleaver apart of Þrívaldi's nine heads, held back your steeds with notorious giant-feast drinker.[1]

It is unusual to find a poem that is clearly related to a myth yet is so incomprehensible. Þrívaldi is a giant-name, and Thor is the god who smashes the skulls of giants; *Snorra Edda* and a verse by Vetrliði Sumaliðason refer to Thor as Þrívaldi's killer. But the reference to Thor holding back his steeds 'with notorious giant-feast drinker' implies a myth that is otherwise entirely lost. Bragi's verse is particularly noteworthy in addressing the god directly. This device is rare in skaldic verse – poets do not often seem to have imagined themselves in communication with the gods, and on those few occasions when they do, it is usually Odin that they address. Perhaps Bragi's direct invocation of Thor indicates that this god had a place in Bragi's active religious beliefs as well as in his store of mythological knowledge; but all we can conclude from this brief fragment is that Thor loomed large in Bragi's imagination.

Bragi also knew myths about other gods. In a single fragmentary stanza that once presumably belonged to a larger poem, he alludes to another famous myth when he calls Odin:

> 'He who threw into the wide winds' basin the ski-goddess's father's eyes above the dwellings of the multitude of men'.[2]

This little shard of myth is typical of skaldic composition – it requires us to know a great deal of background information to understand it. Here, Bragi's allusion is apparently to a story told in full only in *Snorra Edda*. Snorri

describes how a giant named Þjazi forced Loki into bringing the goddess Iðunn and her apples of immortality to him, and how the gods made Loki fly to the giant's realm in the shape of a falcon to recover Iðunn, without whose life-giving fruit the gods were rapidly aging. When Loki turned Iðunn into a nut and flew away with her in his falcon form, Þjazi turned into an eagle and pursued him. After an exciting chase, Loki just made it back to the gods' fortress at Ásgarðr, where a fire had been lit that engulfed the pursuing eagle, bringing him to earth with a bang. The gods killed Þjazi, and in order to placate his grieving daughter Skaði, Odin placed the giant's eyes in the sky to shine as stars.[3] The reference in Bragi's stanza to the 'ski-goddess' denotes Skaði, whose home was in the high mountains. We do not know whether Bragi knew the whole myth of the theft of Iðunn's apples, or if Snorri's later, fuller account represents a combination of elements drawn from different sources.

Odin is the only god, apart from Thor, who appears in Bragi's surviving verse. In the poem that we know as *Ragnarsdrápa* – allegedly dedicated to the Odinic Ragnarr loðbrók – Odin appears several times. In this case, however, Bragi does not refer directly to myths about Odin, but rather obscurely alludes to some of the god's known characteristics. These references prove that in the ninth century Odin was associated with warfare: Bragi calls him *Hergautr*, meaning something like 'army-god'. Similar names are frequently applied to Odin in skaldic poetry. In the same stanza, Jörð ('earth'), Thor's mother, is denoted through the kenning 'woman-friend of Odin', confirming that some of Odin's family relationships were established at this period. Twice Bragi mentions shields by reference to Odin: he calls them 'pennies of Svölnir's hall' and 'Hjarrandi's hurdles'. *Svölnir* and *Hjarrandi* are yet more poetic names for Odin, which are legion in the skaldic tradition. In *Snorra Edda*, the 'pennies of Svölnir's hall' kenning-type is explained as a description of Odin's hall at Valhalla, which Snorri says had shields as roof-tiles: 'pennies' here simply represent any round object.[4] There is a similar kenning in a poem by another ninth-century Norwegian skald, Þjóðólfr ór Hvinir, which shows that the shield-roof was a well-known attribute of Valhalla, even though Odin's hall is not mentioned by name in either poem. Finally, *Ragnarsdrápa* also mentions the shield through a slight variation of a common type of weapon-kenning, calling it the 'resounding wheel of Högni's maid'.[5] The base word 'wheel' has simply been chosen because of its round shape, but it is modified by reference to the legendary

hero Högni, whose ‘maid’ (actually his daughter) was called Hildr. *Hildr* is both a common word for battle in Old Norse and the name of one of Odin’s valkyries in the eddic poems *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*. It is difficult to assess whether Bragi’s reference to Hildr should count as a *mythological* feature: ‘wheel of battle’ would be just as good a kenning for shield as ‘wheel of the valkyrie’, and the cryptic, punning nature of kenning formation allows both alternatives to be valid.

Ragnarsdrápa is coloured by these Odinic associations, but it would be misleading to think of it as a primarily Odinic poem. In fact, the two sections of the poem that Snorri explicitly calls *Ragnarsdrápa* – ignoring the material on Thor and Miðgarðsormr, which may have belonged to another poem – are not ‘mythic’ but heroic, describing some of the deeds of legendary figures like Jörmunrekkr, Hamðir and Sörli. Odinic imagery forms an important part of its language, but the god himself does not occupy this poem in the way that a protagonist in a myth would. This is typical of skaldic poetry in general: Odin was so closely associated with vital aspects of the court poet’s world – with battle, kings and their aristocratic warriors and poetry itself – that references to him often permeate the skalds’ language even when the poem has nothing to do with Odin as a mythic character. The last of Bragi’s verses illustrates this tendency very well. In it, Bragi identifies himself as a poet in several different ways, many of which allude to Odin’s connection to the art of composition:

> Poets call me Viðurr’s thought-smith, getter of Gautr’s gift, lack-nought hero, server of Yggr’s ale, song-making Móði, skilled smith of rhyme; what is a poet other than that?[6]

Viðurr, *Gautr* and *Yggr* are all names for Odin. Poetry is Odin’s gift, the poet his ‘thought-smith’ or the server of his ale. This last phrase refers to the myth of Odin’s obtaining the mead of poetry, which is one of the most common metaphors skalds used for the practice of their art. (The full version of this story, like so many others, is found in *Snorra Edda*, although it is alluded to widely throughout the history of skaldic poetry.) It seems likely, therefore, that a version of the mead of poetry myth was already in circulation by Bragi’s time, although we cannot tell what form it took at this relatively early stage in the development of skaldic verse.

The only other mythological figures that Bragi mentions are two goddesses, Rán and Hel. Rán appears as a personification or goddess of the sea in other poetry, while Hel is well known from skaldic verse and *Snorra*

Edda – though not the eddic poems – as the guardian of the non-heroic realm of the dead, also called Hel. Bragi calls her the ‘sister of the quite monstrous wolf’, a kenning that we can solve by recourse to Snorri, who confirms that Hel was the sister of both Miðgarðsormr and the terrible wolf, Fenrir; Loki was their father. He gives us no mythological information about Rán, but treats this name as equivalent to ‘goddess’ in general, which in a skaldic kenning can mean ‘woman’: his phrase ‘Rán who wishes too great drying of veins’ denotes Hildr, the valkyrie who encourages or embodies battle, in which dying men’s veins will run dry.

Bragi’s work, the earliest Norse poetry that survives, shows that skaldic technique, including complex kenning formation, was well developed in the ninth century. Mythology was an important part of the skald’s repertoire of imagery. Poetry could be used to narrate stories of the gods – as in the case of Bragi’s account of Thor’s fishing trip – but his mythological references are mainly allusive and non-narrative. People must have had prior knowledge – about Odin’s characteristics and some of his deeds, for example – to understand Bragi’s kennings. But we might note too that this knowledge, though deep, was not necessarily very broad: Bragi was interested in Thor as a mythic hero, and Odin as his poetic patron and perhaps the aristocratic warrior god who was favoured by his employers at the Swedish court. He does not display knowledge of many other mythological figures, and his surviving poetry does not suggest that he knew the full range of myths available in later sources. While his poetry reaches out into the world of myth, there is no evidence that he knew any *eddic* poetry. The myths that he seems to allude to are not well represented in the *Poetic Edda* (with the exception of the very late version of Thor’s fishing trip found in *Hymiskviða*), but are only fully narrated by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century. Since Snorri knew Bragi’s work, it is possible that he used it as one of the sources from which he reconstructed the full form of these myths.

MYTHS FIT FOR A KING

The skalds who followed in Bragi’s footsteps used myths in similar ways. The two other most important poets in the second half of the ninth century, like Bragi, were Norwegians, but they both remained in Norway and became

closely associated with King Haraldr hárfagri (‘Fine-Hair’), who lived from c. 850–930 and is often called the first king of a united Norway: his reign probably began around 872. We do not know much about Haraldr’s religion, and nothing in his biography (*Haralds saga hárfagra*, part of Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*) suggests that his court was particularly interested in pagan mythology. But the poets Þjóðólfr ór (from) Hvinir and Þórbjörn hornklofi (‘horn-blast’) were both part of his circle, and both composed poetry steeped in mythological associations.

Þjóðólfr is most famous for two long poems. *Haustlöng* (‘autumn-long’), like Bragi’s *Ragnarsdrápa*, is a shield-poem.[7] It is also only preserved in fourteenth-century copies of the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda*. *Ynglingatal*, meanwhile, is a poetic list of the legendary Swedish ancestors of the Norwegian kings that pays particular attention to how each member of the royal line met his death. It is preserved in Snorri’s *Ynglinga saga*, for which it serves as a principal source. At the end of *Ynglingatal*, Þjóðólfr refers to a Rögnvaldr, who may have been his patron: most likely this is Rögnvaldr Óláfsson, a cousin of Haraldr hárfagri who ruled the Norwegian province of Grenland during the early part of Haraldr’s life. *Haralds saga* also states, however, that Þjóðólfr was a ‘good friend’ of Haraldr. *Skáldatal* records that Þjóðólfr composed a poem in honour of Haraldr, but it has not survived. Aside from these scant details, nothing is known about Þjóðólfr apart from the verse attributed to him.

There are several points of comparison between Þjóðólfr’s *Haustlöng* and the poetry of his predecessor Bragi. Like *Ragnarsdrápa*, it is a poem that relates scenes from narratives that the poet supposedly had seen depicted on a shield: in this instance a gift he had received from a man named Þórleifr. Þjóðólfr’s poem contains two such narratives. In the first half of the poem, he provides a full account of the theft of Iðunn’s apples, to which Bragi referred briefly in the fragment discussed above. He includes all the *dramatis personae* from the first part of the myth as Snorri developed it: Odin and Loki, Iðunn and the giant Þjazi. But Þjóðólfr does not mention the aftermath of Loki’s flight back to Ásgarðr; this section of *Haustlöng* concludes with the giant perishing in the gods’ fire, and does not mention Skaði or her demand for compensation, to which Bragi alluded. Like Bragi, Þjóðólfr knew many ways of referring to the gods: Loki is called ‘Odin’s friend’ and ‘Farbauti’s boy’ (Farbauti is another Odinic name), as well as ‘father of the wolf’ (which alludes to his family relationship to the great monsters of the Norse cosmos),

the ‘burden of Sigyn’s arms’ (Sigyn is Loki’s wife) and ‘Thor’s confidant’. He is also called ‘thief of the gods’ Brising-girdle’, which refers to an obscure myth mentioned by Snorri and the poet Úlfr Uggason in which Freyja’s famous necklace – the ‘Brising-girdle’ – is stolen. Odin is a ‘helmet-capped educator’, the ‘gracious lord of earth’ and ‘raven-god’. Þjóðólfr also uses the god-names Týr and Freyr in kennings, although neither of these figures takes part in the narrative: like many skalds, he uses Týr as a synonym for any (unspecified) god, and he calls the gods ‘Yngvi-Freyr’s family’. It is interesting to note that Yngvi-Freyr is the name of the pseudo-historical figure from whom the Swedish kings are said to be descended in *Ynglinga saga*. He is not mentioned in Þjóðólfr’s *Ynglingatal*, but the beginning of that poem may now be missing.

The second half of *Haustlöng* turns to a different scene on the shield. Here, Thor is the protagonist. Once more, we know the full version of this myth only from Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*, which gives us considerably more information than we find in Þjóðólfr’s poem. It is another example of the myth-type in which Thor pits his strength against a monstrous adversary: in this case, a giant named Hrungnir. Þjóðólfr does not mention the events that lead up to their fight – in Snorri’s version, Thor becomes angry when Hrungnir is invited to the gods’ feast and makes threatening boasts about how he plans to transport the gods’ hall to Giantland and take Freyja and Sif, Thor’s wife. The giants’ desire to possess goddesses is a recurrent theme in the mythology, and one of the major causes of the gods’ enmity towards them. *Haustlöng*, however, begins *in medias res*, with Thor riding in his chariot towards his duel with Hrungnir. The action is tersely described in this version of the myth: Thor approaches, the fearful giant waits for him; they fight, and Thor smashes Hrungnir with his hammer. Hrugnir’s own special weapon, his whetstone, flies out of his hand and lodges in the god’s skull. Þjóðólfr says that ‘there to this day, rigid in the skull of Odin’s boy, the pumice of steel blades has been standing soaked in the blood of Einriði’, where Einriði and ‘Odin’s boy’ are both alternative ways of naming Thor. In the final stanza of the poem, Þjóðólfr says that the whetstone will remain in Thor’s head until a nursing-goddess chants spells over it. Snorri describes how a sorceress named Gróa tried to perform this operation, but became distracted and forgot the necessary spells. Snorri concludes with a little folkloric advice: he says that it is taboo to throw a whetstone across a room, because then Hrungnir’s weapon moves in Thor’s head. This precept may be

Snorri's invention.

There are only the two characters in Þjóðólfr's telling of the myth, but once again he alludes to mythical connections beyond his own story, chiefly through kennings for Thor. The god is 'Meili's blood-kinsman' – Meili is named as one of Odin's sons in a list in *Snorra Edda* – 'Baldr's bosom-brother' and 'Ground's [i.e. Jörð's/Earth's] lad'. Þjóðólfr, like Bragi, clearly knew the gods' full genealogy. Thor is also called Ullr's father-in-law in *Haustlöng* – a reference to the god who, as we have seen, was quite widely worshipped in Norway and Sweden, but about whom no full myths survive. Snorri states that Ullr was Sif's son from a relationship prior to her marriage to Thor (making Thor Ullr's stepfather rather than father-in-law), but he does not explain the circumstances of his conception. I believe *Haustlöng* also contains the earliest surviving textual reference to the god Baldr, who later becomes such a central figure in the mythology, although no information about him is given here.

Haustlöng is a well-preserved example of the mythological shield-poem that seems to have been fashionable in pagan Scandinavia. It is sometimes very difficult to understand, both because there are errors and omissions in our text and because of its complicated kennings. As a vehicle for mythological narrative, however, it is relatively straightforward. It tells two apparently integral stories which make sense on their own terms: while we need to know more about the gods than Þjóðólfr tells us here to make sense of his kennings, each story is complete in itself. The myth of the theft of Iðunn's apples is the more famous of the two, and was also known to Bragi, whereas *Haustlöng*'s account of Thor's dealings with Hrungnir is the only poetic version of this myth. Together with Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* and verses about Thor and the world-serpent, *Haustlöng* provides us with a glimpse of how myth was transmitted through skaldic poetry in the ninth century. These poems are allusive and refer outwards to an established body of information, but they are also a workable form of narrative. However, they do seem to resemble the visual depictions of myths on which they were supposedly based, in that they present a succession of static scenes rather than a fluid and fluent story such as we often find in eddic poems or prose retellings. It seems that in the ninth century, myths received similar treatment in both visual and verbal artforms; in both cases, they relied upon their audiences having sufficient mythological knowledge to do a substantial amount of interpretative work and to make connections between fragments of narrative.

Þjóðólfr's other major poem, *Ynglingatal*, is quite different in form. It is in a less complex metre than *Haustlöng*'s, but that is not to say that *Ynglingatal* is exactly an easy poem to understand – much of the vocabulary that Þjóðólfr uses and the references he makes are obscure, and it contains some difficult kennings. *Ynglingatal* is a poetical list, which is what the word *tal* (deriving from *telja*, 'to count') means. Each stanza takes a different king and briefly gives a notable fact or two about his reign before describing the (often unlikely) way in which the ruler came to grief. *Ynglingatal* is not a mythological poem. Although the Yngling royal dynasty was thought to descend from Odin and Freyr, the kings in Þjóðólfr's poem are all human, and their alleged divine ancestry is not mentioned. The function of myth in *Ynglingatal* is once again referential – it is an important part of the poem's cultural background, without being the main subject. As we might expect of a poem that is so deeply concerned with death, several of its mythological references relate to dying; they do not, however, tell us about myths of the afterlife – what happens to the kings after their demise is not an idea that Þjóðólfr pursues.

Two mythological figures are connected with death in *Ynglingatal*. First, King Vanlandi is said to 'visit Víli's brother':

> A vile witch caused Vanlandi to visit Víli's brother [Odin], when the troll-woman, the wicked wench, trod on the warrior king; he was burned on the bank of Skútá, the noble prince, whom the nightmare killed.[8]

In the prose that introduces this stanza in *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri explains this 'nightmare' as a supernatural attack by some Finnish magicians. 'Víli's brother' is Odin; this brother is named in both *Snorra Edda* and the eddic poem *Lokasenna* ('Loki's Quarrel'). We might infer from this that Þjóðólfr imagined Vanlandi as having a happy afterlife in Odin's hall of Valhalla, but nothing in *Ynglingatal* indicates certain knowledge of Valhalla. 'To go to Odin' is simply a metaphor meaning 'to die', and Vanlandi is the only Yngling king in Þjóðólfr's list who goes to Odin. Though Odin was clearly associated with death, there is no indication of the high-status warrior afterlife in Valhalla that we find in later poems.

The funeral rites that the poet claims were observed for Vanlandi resemble Ibn Fadlan's account of the Volga ship-cremation, in that he too is burned on the banks of a river. This correspondence might suggest that this type of funerary practice was also current in the Norway of Þjóðólfr's time; though

since Vanlandi's death took place in the dim and distant semi-historical past, it might equally be a recollection or reimagining of much earlier customs.

Hel is the more important mythological figure connected with death in *Ynglingatal*: she appears in five stanzas to Odin's one. In this poem, Hel is not a place in the mythological universe, but always a 'goddess' – although it is doubtful whether she should really be classed among the *Æsir*, since she also has family connections with the giants, the gods' enemies. We can confirm this by looking at the kennings that Þjóðólfr uses for her: she is called 'Loki's daughter' (Stanza 7), 'Loki's child' (Stanza 26) and 'Býleistr's brother's daughter' (Stanza 25) – *Snorra Edda* and the eddic poems *Völuspá* and *Hyndluljóð* attest that Loki had a brother named Býleistr. Hel is also mentioned by name in Stanzas 8 and 24 of *Ynglingatal*. Her function is either to receive the dead person (perhaps in some special realm in the afterlife, although Þjóðólfr does not say so directly) or actively to seek out and collect him. In the first reference to Hel, it seems she may even have a sexual relationship with the deceased king:

> I do not doubt but that Glitnir's goddess has Dyggvi's corpse for pleasure; the sister of the wolf and Narfi had to choose a king-man. Loki's daughter has taken the ruler of Yngvi's people.[9]

In this verse, Hel is 'the sister of the wolf', which attests to her relationship to Loki's other child, Fenrir. Narfi, to whom Þjóðólfr also says she is related, is a more obscure figure, although this name is given to another of Loki's sons in the *Poetic Edda*. 'Glitnir's goddess' is almost incomprehensible, and we only interpret it as Hel on the basis of the other, clearer references to her in the same stanza. This idea, that Hel takes 'corpses' for her sexual enjoyment is not paralleled elsewhere. In Stanza 24, Hel 'takes' King Hálfdan hvítbeinn ('white-leg') – here, she is also called 'guardian of grave-mounds'; she 'summons' his grandson, also called Hálfdan (Stanza 26), whereas kings Eysteinn (Stanza 25) and Dagr simply 'go' to Hel. The way in which a king dies does not seem to have any bearing on whether he is thought to go to Hel or to Odin; even those kings who are hanged – who we might expect to be symbolically dedicated to Odin – are not said to go to the god of death. All this contradicts the much later – but widely accepted – statement in *Snorra Edda* that, according to pagan belief, all people who died in battle went to Valhalla, while all those who died of sickness or old age would go to Hel.[10] Þjóðólfr does not make a distinction between the two figures on the basis of

any particular mode of death.

Apart from Hel and Odin, references to the gods in *Ynglingatal* are limited to brief mentions of deities from whom the kings are said to be descended. A king may be called a descendent of any god, it seems, suggesting a connection between pagan kingship and divinity. Dómarr is called 'Yngvi's kinsman' (Stanza 6), using the name of the god with whom Freyr was identified at the head of the Swedish royal genealogy; 'Freyr's offspring' is a kenning for two scions of the dynasty, Alrekkr and Eiríkr, who fight for their father's kingdom in Stanza 10. The Norwegians who hang Guðlaugr are called 'Yngvi's sons' (Stanza 16); the same phrase is used to refer to the Swedish king, Aðils. More unexpectedly, King Egill, who is gored to death by a bull, is called 'Týr's offspring' (Stanza 14). As we have already seen, Týr's cult appears to have been of little importance in Norway. Unlike Odin, Freyr and Njörðr, Týr does not appear in the Yngling family tree, so it might seem curious that a Norwegian poet like Þjóðólfr should include a reference to a god who was ostensibly 'foreign'. It is important to emphasize, however, that Norse pagans probably had knowledge of the full pantheon, even if an individual god was of less significance to their own community than others. Even though Týr was not widely venerated north of Denmark, his divinity was sufficiently well established for skalds to use his name as a general word for 'god' in their kennings. Typically, Þjóðólfr's allusion to Týr is too brief to tell us where this god fitted into the poet's conception of the pantheon.

Þjóðólfr mentions the fertility god (Yngvi-) Freyr often, as befits a poem that purports to describe his human descendants. Freyr was, as we have seen, widely worshipped in the Ynglings' supposed Swedish homelands. In contrast with figures like Odin, Thor, Loki and Hel, however, we do not really get any information about Freyr from Þjóðólfr's poetry. He does not describe a myth that features Freyr in *Haustlöng*, and when Freyr appears in *Ynglingatal* it is simply as the legendary head of the royal family. Þjóðólfr does not use Freyr in kennings or allude to any of the god's characteristics as they are known from other sources. Since Freyr had no significant presence in Bragi's poetry, either, we might wonder whether there was a disparity between Freyr's apparently important role in religion and his relatively insignificant position in the mythology of the early poets. Perhaps fertility gods like Freyr – while useful and necessary to many rural communities – were less likely to attract stories about their actions than Odin, for example, who had a clearly defined place in the world of myth, but whose role in

actual pagan religion is more difficult to identify.

There is an interesting reference in *Ynglingatal* to the possible significance of agricultural fertility in pagan Norse religion, however. According to Þjóðólfr, the Swedes killed one of their kings, Dómaldi, when they were ‘eager for crops’:

> It happened once, that sword-carrying men reddened the earth with their lord. The land-army bore bloodied weapons from Dómaldi, lacking of life, when the race of the Swedes, eager for crops, would sacrifice the enemy of the Jutes.[11]

The word *sóa* in the original Old Norse has led many scholars to believe that Dómaldi was deliberately sacrificed by his people to ensure a successful harvest: *sóa* is an extremely rare word, and difficult to interpret, but it is undoubtedly connected to pagan ritual. It is usually translated as ‘to sacrifice’, although the normal verb describing this type of act is *blóta*. Snorri Sturluson certainly interpreted Þjóðólfr’s stanza as referring to a deliberate act of sacrifice. In his prose introduction to the verse, he seems in no doubt that the Swedes were making their king the victim of a fertility ritual:

> Then the chieftains had their assembly and they agreed the famine was caused by their king, Dómaldi, and because of that, that they should sacrifice him for a good year, and attack him and kill him and redden the altars with his blood, and so they did.[12]

Snorri’s account, taken together with the evidence from *Ynglingatal*, has led scholars to posit the existence of a form of ‘sacral kingship’ in pagan Sweden. The ‘sacral kingship’ theory holds that a people’s ruler was endowed with a special divine status, as a direct link between the community and their gods, and was individually responsible for ensuring that a community’s needs were met through supernatural means. Thus, it was Dómaldi’s job, as a ‘sacral’ king, to ensure that the seasons turned, and that agriculture prospered, as they should. When the crops failed, the Swedes blamed Dómaldi, and killed him as an offering to unnamed higher powers. According to Snorri, their action was successful: the reign of the next king, Dómarr, was notable for a long succession of good growing seasons.

I do not think that Stanza 5 of *Ynglingatal*, on its own, is sufficient to prove that early Scandinavian paganism really incorporated sacral kingship into its core belief system: it is possible to read Þjóðólfr’s version of events as a political coup rather than a religious rite. The Swedes were dissatisfied with Dómaldi’s rule, that much is clear, but Þjóðólfr does not make an

explicit cause and effect connection between the Swedes' eagerness for a good harvest and Dómaldi's murder; that connection comes from Snorri's own interpretation of the verse. Neither version tells us to which god or gods Dómaldi was sacrificed. On the other hand, it does not seem entirely unlikely that a pagan king should have had a special significance as a religious leader, and the Swedes who reckoned their descent from Freyr might well have placed a premium on agricultural fertility. This story is not exactly a myth, and it does not mention any of the Norse gods, but it is a relatively rare early example of a narrative that seems to describe an aspect of pagan religion, and to identify the connections between belief and practice that are often so difficult to discern in other sources.

Þjóðólfr's two main poems reveal that he was a master of more than one form of skaldic verse, and that he used mythological elements in different ways depending on the form in which he composed. The shield-poem, *Haustlöng*, shows that he knew full versions of two myths – Iðunn and the apples and Thor and Hrungnir – and that the complicated skaldic metre could be adapted to tell a relatively straightforward story. The myths that he narrates in *Haustlöng* are known from other sources, but are not represented in any comprehensive version in surviving eddic poetry. *Ynglingatal*, meanwhile, is a historical (or rather pseudo-historical) work. There is no place for myth, *per se*, in his sequence of obituaries for the Swedish kings, but mythological references still make up an important part of his vocabulary. He displays knowledge of a slightly wider range of gods than we find in Bragi's poetry, and seems to be more interested in the fertility gods than in warrior gods like Odin. Odin plays a relatively minor role in *Ynglingatal* – he is associated with death, but Þjóðólfr does not allude to any Odinic myths. We do not know if Þjóðólfr worshipped any god in particular (as a poet we would naturally assume for him a connection with Odin), but the Swedes whose kings he describes seem to have had a particular interest in Freyr, which may reflect the real beliefs of the social groups whose history he claims to relate.

Another poem sometimes attributed to Þjóðólfr is *Hrafnsmál* ('The Raven's Speech'), otherwise known as *Haraldskvæði* ('Haraldr's Poem'). In fact, this composition more likely is by Þórbjörn hornklofi, another Norwegian skald working at the end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth. Þórbjörn was an official poet at the court of Haraldr hárfagri, although little else is known about him. *Hrafnsmál* is a praise-poem in

honour of King Haraldr that lauds his bravery, prowess in battle and generosity – the noblest characteristics expected of a Viking-Age ruler. It is notable mainly because it uses an 'eddic' metre: it closely resembles the type of poetry that was used for mythic narratives. It could claim with some justification to be the earliest 'eddic' poem to have survived, although it is not included in the *Poetic Edda* collection: like *Ynglingatal*, *Hrafnsmál* is preserved in manuscripts of Snorri's *Heimskringla*.

Hrafnsmál is a mythological poem in more than just its choice of metre. It consists of an imagined dialogue between a valkyrie and a raven, who meet following a battle and discuss King Haraldr's exploits and claims to greatness. The choice of protagonists and battlefield location place the poem in an Odinic frame of reference, although Odin does not appear in person. Indeed, direct references to gods are infrequent in *Hrafnsmál*: rather than being called 'Odin's bird' (or something similar), the raven is referred to by the kenning 'Hymir's skull-picker', referring in a rather obscure way to the giant in the myth of Thor and the world-serpent. The kenning presumably alludes to the fact that Hymir was killed by Thor, and that the raven, the quintessential carrion bird, would have feasted on his remains. Only one god is mentioned by name in *Hrafnsmál*, and that – startlingly – is Freyr. In one of the stanzas that describe Haraldr's bravery and fondness for fighting, the raven states that the king eschews the comforts of home to play 'Freyr's game':

> If he gets his own way, the king will drink his Yule-tide toast at sea and play the game of Freyr. Even in his youth he showed no inclination for the fireside and indoor life, the warm bower or pillows stuffed with down.[13]

Bearing in mind his function as a fertility god, we might expect that 'Freyr's game' would be one played in private by two consenting adults, but in context this kenning can only mean 'battle'. The substitution of Freyr's name instead of the more expected reference to Odin or a valkyrie is inexplicable: there is no indication in other sources that Freyr was connected to warfare or death. The eddic poem *Grímnismál* ('Grímnir's Sayings'), however, states that Freyr's sister, Freyja, was connected with violent death:

> Folkvang is the ninth [mythical hall], and there Freyja arranges
> the choice of seats in the hall;
> half the slain she chooses every day,
> and half Odin owns.[14]

Scholars have never been able to explain why Freyja, one of the Vanir fertility gods who is normally associated with love and sex, should be mentioned in the same breath as Odin in this description of a warrior afterlife. But it might help to make better sense of Stanza 6 of *Hrafnsmál* if we accept that fertility and death were somehow intertwined in pagan thought. This is not unreasonable: the ancient Spartans sacrificed to Eros, god of love, before their battles, for example. Thus, the reference in Þórbjörn's poem may indicate that, like his sister, Freyr had had a connection with warfare that has disappeared from his portrayal elsewhere. Just possibly Freyr here is an error for Freyja, although the manuscript is quite clear at this point and the grammatical ending in the original Old Norse definitely indicates a masculine referent. Either way, the mythological significance of Freyr's role in *Hrafnsmál* remains extremely obscure.

Hrafnsmál is a curious example of a poem that resembles the mythological verse of the *Poetic Edda*, but which actually makes few references to myth. It does not allude to any stories about the gods, and its purpose is to praise a human hero. Nothing in the poem connects it directly to religious belief or practice – we do not learn which deity Haraldr particularly worshipped or whether his role as king included any religious function. Medieval biographies of Haraldr do not pay much attention to the religious situation of his reign: his paganism seems to have been a relatively unimportant factor in his political career. Although poets of Haraldr's time clearly knew many stories about the gods, and although Haraldr was undoubtedly a pagan, *Hrafnsmál* chooses to portray the king without reference to his own religion, and with only very limited allusion to mythological motifs. Haraldr's glory did not depend upon his relationship to a god; his success was not down to divine intervention. *Hrafnsmál* tells us that the king is worthy of praise entirely on the basis of his secular activities, even though it uses a mythological setting to frame the information it gives. Þórbjörn's other major surviving poem, *Glymdrápa* ('Resounding Poem'), is an account of some of Haraldr's battles that operates on a similar mythological level to *Hrafnsmál*. It contains a few kennings that require some general mythological knowledge to understand, but it does not refer to particular mythological narratives, and the gods are absent from the scenes of Haraldr's triumphs.

When Haraldr hárfagri's reign came to an end around 933, Norway was a very different place to the collection of fragmented regional chieftaincies that had been the target of his youthful plans to conquer and unite the whole

country. His rule was – so the sagas tell us – absolute and somewhat tyrannical. Unsurprisingly, therefore, his consolidation of power was very unpopular with the sub-kings and regional earls whom he displaced; in Icelandic sources, Haraldr is often solely blamed for the mass emigration from Norway that took place in the second half of the ninth century. During this period, the Faeroes, Orkney and Iceland all became established as Norse colonies. The settlement of Iceland, in particular, was to have lasting repercussions for Old Norse poetry and therefore also for the production and conservation of myths. Although Haraldr's reign was turbulent, religion was not one of the bones of contention between the king and his put-upon subjects. Indeed, the limited body of poetry that survives from his reign carries a rather low religious burden. That is not to say that paganism was less widely practised in Norway at this time than in other periods or regions, or that it had less importance in people's lives. However, the marginal position of the gods in poems directly connected to King Haraldr suggests that they were not regarded as necessary or particularly important elements in praise-poetry. Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal*, too, although it was probably composed for a different chieftain, regards the 'gods' as being ancestral figures rather than deities in the strict sense of the word, although it does preserve references to mythological conceptions of death and dying. Perhaps a time of religious stability is – ironically – not the most fertile breeding ground for fully developed stories about the gods. As we shall see in the next chapter, mythological poetry in Scandinavia reached its apogee during a period of intense religious conflict in Norway.

Myths were created and circulated in ninth-century Norway, but poetry was not their only, or even their primary vehicle. The two most important early mythological poems – Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* and Þjóðólfr's *Haustlöng* – are both descriptions of pre-existing versions of the myths: the images that were painted on the shields that they supposedly describe. We also know that picture stones were used to display mythic images in this period and earlier. It is possible that the use of poetry to tell mythological stories was a relatively new innovation, (although this is an argument out of silence, since the evidence is so sparse). Some myths clearly existed in a relatively full form – Thor's duel with the serpent and the story of the theft of Iðunn's apples notable among them – but it is significant that none of the great myths preserved in the *Poetic Edda* are represented in skaldic poetry of this date. There are no references to a pagan creation myth, for example, or to

Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse. Of course, these stories may have been known, but there is no evidence to prove that they had taken on their final poetic forms by this stage. There is also a striking lack of *religious* content or context in the poems that we have seen here: myth was part of poets' vocabulary, and certainly provided them with an important artistic frame of reference, but it is hardly possible to draw a direct connection between their poems and their actual religious beliefs: still less to any form of religious practice.

THE FASHION FOR VALHALLA

Unsurprisingly when a king has as many as twenty children – depending upon which source we read – by eight different women, the succession to the Norwegian throne after Haraldr's death was hotly contested. Eiríkr Haraldsson – known as blóðøx ('blood-axe') – was one of the early front-runners for the crown, having seized the important Vík region (modern-day Oslo fjord) and defeated his half-brothers Óláfr and Sigröðr in a pitched battle. Eiríkr's triumph was short-lived, however, because another brother, the fifteen-year-old Hákon góði ('the good') returned from England to Norway in 934 and soon drove Eiríkr out of the kingdom. Eiríkr went west across the sea and established himself as lord over the Norsemen of York. His rule there lasted no more than five or six years before he in turn was killed in a battle against representatives of the English king, Edmund.

Little poetry deriving from Eiríkr's court survives, owing probably to the brevity and upheaval of his rule in both Norway and Northumbria. But the thirteenth-century Norwegian history *Fagrskinna* records that upon his death Eiríkr's widow, Gunnhildr, ordered a poem to be composed in his memory. This poem, *Eiríksmál*, is preserved in *Fagrskinna*, although it is probably incomplete in its present form. Unusually for a skaldic poem, it is anonymous, and there is therefore some doubt about its dating and authenticity, even though it corresponds in several details with information that we also find in prose accounts of Eiríkr's life and death. These accounts in turn may be unreliable because they are based upon *Eiríksmál* – a typically circular problem that we meet when we try to use later sagas as sources for the history of the Viking Age. However, if *Eiríksmál* was indeed composed

soon after the king's death around 940, it provides us with a valuable insight into developing forms of poetry, literary taste and the place of myth within skaldic art.

Eiríksmál is not far removed in date from Þórbjörn's *Hrafnsmál*, and there are major similarities between the two poems. Like *Hrafnsmál*, *Eiríksmál* is composed in an eddic metre, and likewise it expresses itself through direct speech. The speakers in *Eiríksmál* are not a valkyrie and a raven, however, but a group of gods and heroes and the dead king himself. The scene takes place in Valhalla, and Odin begins with a speech in which he describes a dream that came to him the night before:

> 'What kind of a dream is it,' said Odin,
> '– in which just before daybreak
> I thought I prepared Valhalla
> for the arrival of dead men?
> I woke the einherjar,
> told the valkyries to rise up,
> to place straw on the benches
> and clean the goblets.'[15]

Odin confesses that he is happy because certain great heroes, a king among them, are expected to arrive in Valhalla. Then the gods hear a loud noise, prompting Bragi – by this point clearly a mythological figure rather than a historical poet – to ask:

> 'What thunders there, [. . .]
> Like a thousand stirring,
> or too great a multitude?
> All the benches are creaking
> as if Baldr were coming
> back to the halls of Odin.'

As Odin informs Bragi, it is not his (presumably dead) son Baldr who comes to visit them, but King Eiríkr blóðøx. He commands two great heroes of Germanic legend, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli, to go and greet the king. But Sigmundr asks Odin why Eiríkr's arrival among the dead is so eagerly expected, to which Odin replies, in effect, that Eiríkr has the right stuff to join the company who will fight on the gods' side at the end of the world:

> 'Why do you expect Eiríkr,' said Sigmundr,
> 'more than other kings?'

‘Because he has made many lands red
with his sword,’ said Odin,
‘And carried a bloody blade.’

‘Why deprive him of victory,
if he seems valiant to you?’
‘For the future is unknown,’ said Odin,
‘the hoary wolf looks
grimly at the dwellings of the gods.’

Here the *Eiríksmál*-poet makes the earliest surviving reference to the myth of Ragnarök, which is known in its full form from *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda*: the wolf is Fenrir, who will ravage the world of the gods on his way to the final battle. Odin is seen building up his army of hand-picked warriors (the *einherjar*) who will fight against the giants and monsters when the time comes – Odin suggests that time might not be too far away. It is the first real indication that the end of the world was considered a realistic – even imminent – threat among at least some Norse pagans in the tenth century.

Eiríksmál is remarkable not merely for its ‘eddic’ metre, which it shares with *Hrafnsmál*, but for the way in which it places a human subject in the world of the gods. This is very rare in Old Norse mythological poetry. Although the gods move across the everyday world and interact with normal people in some very late prose romances, in general they operate on a stage that is kept strictly separate from the ‘reality’ of our life on earth. It is highly unusual to place a king among the gods, although we know that poets already did have knowledge of Valhalla: Eiríkr’s entry into the realm of the gods and heroic dead is an imaginative redevelopment of existing beliefs, in other words. Its purpose is to use mythological imagery to praise the dead king. Whereas *Hrafnsmál* restricted its encomium for Haraldr to descriptions of his laudable deeds and honourable behaviour, *Eiríksmál* takes the same basic idea – that the king was brave, and won many battles – and gives it supernatural significance. Eiríkr has been fighting for a greater good, or so it implies. It also helps to explain a conundrum that seems even to have puzzled the great hero Sigmundr: by definition, those who die in battle and go to Odin are warriors who have somehow failed. By explaining that Odin’s need for brave warriors to join the *einherjar* is pressing and that this need caused him to deny Eiríkr victory, the king’s death becomes blameless, praiseworthy, heroic and divinely sanctioned. It is an effective strategy for explaining away the uncomfortable truth about a ruler’s death in a poem that is supposed to

glorify him. It is also a remarkable example of how mythology could be used for political purposes. All praise-poetry is propaganda, but here the ideological values underlying the poem's message are determined by the subject's position in relation to mythological structures, Odin especially. *Eiríksmál* is an early and particularly clear example of how Odin and Valhalla were at the heart of an ideology surrounding a warrior aristocracy that centred on their king. As we have discussed earlier, Odin's cultic connections with warrior societies seems to be quite ancient, but in the tenth century poets began to stress the connections between warriors, death and Odin in new and imaginative ways. *Eiríksmál* was the first example of this trend, but not the last.

Eiríkr's brother, Hákon góði, ruled Norway until about 961: his reign was turbulent, as Eiríkr's sons strove to reclaim what they perceived as their rightful inheritance. In the main biography of Hákon, found once again in the much later *Heimskringla*, he is represented as a popular and populist king. His saga claims that people thought that he was Haraldr hárfagri reborn, but unlike his father, Hákon consolidated his power over the Norwegian people by making concessions to them, such as confirming their right to possess their ancestral estates: a policy that ran contrary to Haraldr's draconian subjugation of Norway's farmer-chieftains. According to *Heimskringla*, therefore, Hákon was crowned king as a direct result of his popular support, which soon spread across the whole of the country.

There was a second fundamental difference to Hákon's rule: he was a Christian. He was fostered as a child at the court of the Christian English king, Athelstan, and the saga states that he had already been confirmed when he arrived back in Norway at the age of fifteen. To begin with, his religion remained a personal rather than a political matter, as *Heimskringla* makes clear:

> Since the land was altogether heathen and much idolatry prevailed, and also because there were many great chieftains and he considered that he much needed their help and the friendship of the people, he adopted the course of practising Christianity secretly, observing Sundays and fasting on Fridays . . . It was his plan that when he had firmly established himself and had the whole country in his power, that he then would have the gospel preached.[16]

He began by coaxing 'those who were dearest to him' into adopting Christianity, with the result that many people gave up sacrificing to the old gods. When his subjects tried to force him to take part in a sacrifice, Hákon

refused to eat the hallowed horsemeat, much to the pagans' displeasure. After a while, he sent for foreign priests to spread the gospel, although he did not try to affect conversion by force. In fact, the pagan Norwegians rejected the king's plans to make the whole nation Christian, and the farmers around Trondheim burned down three of the king's new churches. Paganism still had a vital and valued role in Norwegian culture at this time, which people were prepared to defend even against royal authority. *Heimskringla* includes a detailed and famous description of pagan ritual that illustrates its place in the life of the community:

> Sigurðr, earl of Hlaðir, was a most ardent heathen worshipper, as had been Hákon, his father. Earl Sigurðr maintained all sacrificial feasts there in Trondheim on the king's behalf. It was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the heathen temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, including horses . . . The sacrificial beaker was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast and was chieftain, was to bless the beaker as well as all the sacrificial meat. Odin's toast was to be drunk first – that was for victory and power to the king – then Njörðr's and Freyr's, for good harvests and for peace.[17]

Although this description, which was written by an Icelander two centuries after Norway's conversion, may not be absolutely reliable, it does seem to agree with the impression of pagan religion we have gained from other sources. Religious authority is harnessed to secular authority, with the chieftain also serving as priest; sacrifice of animals is essential to the ritual; different gods had different functions, with Odin's pre-eminence owing to the connection of his cult with kingship and victory in battle. It is notable that Thor is not included in the short list of gods worshipped in the Trondheim ceremony. It seems the Trondheimers prioritized victory, prosperity and peace over whatever it was that Thor was thought to offer his followers – at least according to this account. But later in the story, when the king refuses to take part in the sacrificial feast and makes the sign of the cross over his drink, *Heimskringla* states that Earl Sigurðr told his fellow pagans that 'the king does as all do who believe in their own might and strength, and dedicated his cup to Thor. He made the sign of the hammer over it before drinking'.[18] This episode seems likely to be the saga-author's invention, exploiting the visual similarity between Christ's cross and Thor's hammer, although this similarity seems also to have been recognised in the Viking Age itself. There is no evidence elsewhere to support the idea that Thor was venerated by those who

believed primarily in their own power, however.

In Hákon's reign, therefore, we find the first signs of conflict between two religions in an area where Norse mythology was still very much a living force. We might expect to see traces of the tension between the two religious-cultural systems in contemporary poetry: notably, though, the verse that survives from Hákon's reign seems basically pagan, even though the king himself espoused Christianity.

In fact, on the basis of the texts that survive, Hákon's reign does not look like a particularly fertile period for skaldic poetry. Only two poets composed full-length praise-poetry in honour of the king, and *Heimskringla* does not embellish its account of his life with as many stanzas as survive from the courts of other pagan rulers. The first of the major Hákon-poems, Guðormr sindri's *Hákonardrápa*, tells of several of the king's early battles against the Danes. It is quite a conventional poem, which makes only sporadic and clichéd use of mythological elements. Guðormr's mythological kennings are limited to two of the 'god of weapons' (= 'warrior') type. He refers to both Njörðr and Baldr in these constructions, but his choice of god-names has no real significance – any god can serve as the base-word in the kenning, and its selection depends on how it fits into the metre of the stanza, rather than on the identity of the deity. Apart from these rather unoriginal phrases, the pagan gods are absent from *Hákonardrápa*. Guðormr does not allude to any mythic narratives, and there is certainly no religious content in his verses. Perhaps the 'god of weapons' kenning represents the limits of the mythological imagery acceptable to a king who rejected paganism. Another verse in *Heimskringla*, attributed there to Eyvindr Finnsson – although it may actually have been composed by the Icelander Þórgeirr höggvinkinna – uses the same type of kenning, referring to Hákon as 'Njörðr of spear-rain': that is, 'god of battle' or 'warrior'.

Eyvindr Finnsson, who is usually called skáldaspillir (literally 'destroyer of poets', but the nickname is usually translated as 'plagiarist'), is the most famous of King Hákon's poets. Because of his possibly derogatory nickname, Eyvindr's poetry has customarily been viewed as derivative and unoriginal. Although the accusations of plagiarism against Eyvindr are probably overstated, his major poem about King Hákon is superficially very similar to the earlier *Eiríksmál*: indeed *Fagrskinna* states that Eyvindr composed his *Hákonarmál* 'in imitation of the one which Gunnhildr had had composed about Eiríkr, in which Odin invited him home to Valhalla'.[19]

Like *Eiríksmál* and *Hrafnsmál*, Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál* is a poem about an actual king that is set in the world of myth. The three works make up a unique group of 'eddic' praise-poetry, linked by their use of metres more familiar from the mythic narratives of the *Poetic Edda*. All three are also Odinic poems, as befits compositions in honour of warrior-kings. *Hákonarmál* was composed after Hákon's death, so the king was no longer around to object to the excessive amount of pagan imagery in the poem: rarely can a Christian king have been commemorated in so pagan an obituary. It begins with Odin sending two of his valkyries to choose a brave warrior to join him in Valhalla. They quickly settle upon Hákon, and the first half of the poem describes his heroic though unsuccessful final stand against the Danes. These stanzas resemble a more conventional (non-mythological) skaldic praise-poem. But halfway through the poem, the battle-descriptions give way to dialogue between Hákon and the valkyries. The king asks, 'Why did you arrange it thus, Geirr-Skögul, that we lost the battle, though we were worthy of victory from the gods?' (Stanza 12) – alluding to the Valhalla paradox that we also saw addressed in *Eiríksmál*.[20]

The valkyries reply that the Norsemen *have* defeated the Danes, Hákon's death notwithstanding. Then they fly off to tell Odin to prepare for the king's arrival. Two minor gods, Hermóðr and Bragi, welcome Hákon to Valhalla. Hákon does not seem entirely happy about his fate, even when he has arrived at Odin's hall: he tells his companions that they should beware Odin's hostile mood and keep their weapons close at hand just in case, even after Bragi offers them a special truce as new members of the *einherjar*. As Eyvindr imagines it, Hákon's entry into the afterlife is a tense affair, in which the king remains suspicious of the gods. It is tempting to speculate that Hákon is wary of Odin simply because, as a Christian, his attitude towards the chief of the Æsir would of necessity be negative. He would not necessarily have ceased to 'believe' in the existence of Odin; converts to Christianity in the early Middle Ages were encouraged to recognize pagan deities as false gods, or even devils. Eyvindr may be suggesting that Hákon would find his arrival in Valhalla a disturbing experience as a matter of religious principle.

In the last four stanzas the poet speaks in his own voice while praising Hákon, and he does so in a way which combines mythological allusions with references to the king's reign and personality. This final section is not based upon *Eiríksmál*, so far as we can tell – though *Eiríksmál*'s ending is now lost. It is striking that here the Christian king is praised in explicitly pagan terms

and by reference to pagan myths, and that his attitude towards paganism is also praised:

> Then it was seen how the king had
> respected the ancient altars;
> when all the gods and heavenly powers
> welcomed Hákon home.[21]

The ‘respect’ that Hákon is supposed to have shown to places of pagan worship accords with *Heimskringla*’s account of his reign: unlike many missionary kings, Hákon did not attempt to impose Christianity by force; he offered the new religion as an alternative to the old. He tried to promote it positively, building churches rather than tearing down pagan temples, and having the gospel preached rather than forbidding or persecuting pagan worship. This part of Eyvindr’s eulogy quite possibly does reflect history: a pagan poet representing Hákon as a ‘good’ Christian viewed from a pagan perspective. *Hákonarmál*’s audience, too, would have been largely a pagan one and the poem’s function of praising the king’s memory would also need to accommodate his religious views with theirs. The next stanza confirms the affection in which Hákon’s people seem to have held him, regardless of their religious differences:

> On a good day
> the king will be born
> who has such a heart.
> His times will always
> be regarded as good. (Stanza 19)

Then Eyvindr uses a reference to Ragnarök to express how much Hákon will be missed:

> The Fenris-wolf will go free
> and attack the world of men
> before so good a king will come
> to the desolate land. (Stanza 20)

Unlike *Eiríksmál*, this reference is not directly connected to the mythological function of the *einherjar* warriors. Nor, I think, does it imply that Eyvindr imagined the end of the world to be close at hand. It simply suggests that no other king will ever match up to Hákon.

The poem closes with an intriguing allusion to one of the most famous

verses in the Norse mythological tradition:

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> land and lea are destroyed.
> Since Hákon went to the heathen gods,
> many a people has become silent. (Stanza 21)

In this stanza, Eyvindr seems to refer to the Odinic poem *Hávamál* from the *Poetic Edda*. The first section of *Hávamál* consists of proverbial advice, expressed in Odin's own voice. Two of its verses begin with the formula 'cattle die, kinsmen die':

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> but glory never dies,
> for the man who is able to achieve it.
>
> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> I know one thing which never dies:
> the reputation of each dead man.[22]

Just like *Hávamál*, the last stanza of *Hákonarmál* is concerned with reputation, memory and glory, and the use of the 'cattle die, kinsman die' phrase seems designed to bring Hákon's praise into a more mythological, Odinic frame of reference. It would be easy to assume that *Hákonarmál*'s audience would have recognized this formula as coming from *Hávamál*, but no evidence proves *Hávamál* existed in its complete form at this time. The use of the same distinctive formula in both poems shows, however, that verse in this proverbial tradition circulated in the tenth century, even if not much of it survives. It seems likely that this type of wisdom was always associated with Odin: both *Hávamál* and *Hákonarmál* are explicitly Odinic poems, and we have already seen that *Hávamál* reflects other aspects of Odin's cult in its references to the god's self-sacrifice by hanging, and its role in his obtaining occult knowledge. *Hákonarmál* does not refer to any of the other aspects of Odin that we find in *Hávamál*; *Hávamál*, meanwhile, does not mention the Valhalla myth-complex or the place of Odin's warriors in the gods' army at Ragnarök. The two poems' representations of Odin intersect, but they are not identical.

The end of *Hákonarmál* has a rather sombre tone, as the poet looks

forward to a period when ‘many people will become silent’, perhaps because they will be oppressed by outsiders without Hákon to protect them. These are the people whose temples and sanctuaries Hákon respected during his life; Eyvindr seems to imagine a time when a new ruler will be less tolerant of the Norwegians’ religion. It is significant that *Hákonarmál*’s last verse makes a reference to the *heathen* gods: this is the earliest occurrence of the word *heiðinn* in Old Norse. The fact that Eyvindr felt the need to specify that the gods were ‘heathen’ seems to indicate a new awareness that there were alternatives to traditional paganism. This term asserts the pagans’ identity as a religious group, but such an assertion of identity would hardly be necessary if their own religion was the only one they knew about. Hákon’s personal involvement with Christianity, and his abortive attempts to introduce it to Norway, shows that the religious debate in Norway was already crystallizing into an ‘us and them’ dichotomy, even if it had not developed into full-blown conflict. Eyvindr’s memorial poem downplays the religious tension in Hákon’s reign by emphasizing that the king served pagans well, although we might see in Hákon’s reluctance to enter Valhalla traces of his own antipathy towards the old gods. *Hákonarmál* manages to make a Christian king worthy of the pagans’ praise and gratitude. It is thus an effective piece of cultural propaganda that is targeted specifically to the circumstances that prompted its production and the (pagan) audience for whom it was intended. Mythology provides one of the most resonant ways by which the poet asserts Hákon’s right to be considered as a heroic figure and a good king. The timeless world of myth is pressed into service to further the poet’s very worldly aims in the here-and-now.

The three ‘eddic’ praise-poems from the first half of the tenth century – *Hrafnsmál*, *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* – make up a short-lived sub-genre of Old Norse poetry that applies mythological imagery to a real-world situation, blurring the boundaries between the gods’ world and ours. They are all basically Odinic poems, rich in references to aspects of Odinic culture that we have identified elsewhere: battle, death, kingship and the warrior aristocracy. *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* reveal that at this period the idea of Valhalla as an Odinic ‘paradise’ was well developed. We do not know how widespread belief in Valhalla was, however. It is not mentioned very often in skaldic verse of this period or earlier, although ‘going to Odin’ is sometimes used as a metaphor for dying. Perhaps Valhalla was a literary fashion that suited the tastes and aspirations of rulers like Eiríkr and Hákon, rather than a

religious belief that was common throughout society. The pictures that the poems paint of a high-status heroic afterlife, in which military service to the mythical lord Odin gives their royal subjects status and purpose, fits in well with the expectations and norms of an aristocracy where men were bound to their king in life as the king is to Odin after his death. Valhalla, then, is partly made in the image of the royal courts which produced these poems. This reflexive pattern – the historical circumstances of the production of the myth alter the form of the myth, which in turn can be used to shape, influence, or control social norms, values and attitudes – continues throughout the history of Norse mythology. The early tenth-century 'fashion for Valhalla' is a good example of how a particular community produces myths that reflect its own cultural concerns.

Knowledge of the Valhalla-complex was not restricted to *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, however. As we have seen, the 'eddic' form of these poems resembles the major mythological narrative poems preserved in the thirteenth-century *Poetic Edda* collection. Although there is no evidence that they were thought to make up a coherent body of material during the pagan period, it is certainly possible that some of the 'proper' eddic poems were in circulation in tenth-century Norway. The use of the 'cattle die, kinsmen die' formula in *Hákonarmál* suggests that a poem related to what we know as *Hávamál* existed. Another Odinic wisdom poem, *Grímnismál*, one of the great poetic treasure-houses of Norse mythological knowledge, also reveals much about Valhalla and its iconography: it is much more detailed, in fact, than what we find in either *Eiríksmál* or *Hákonarmál*.

Grímnismál takes the form of a monologue in which Odin describes a vision that he sees of all the worlds, almost as if he soars over them in a disembodied state. He sees the different halls that are the sacred homes of the various gods – Thor, Ullr, Freyr, Heimdallr, Baldr, Freyja and, of course, Odin himself. He also mentions the places where other mythological beings – like the giant Þjazi and his daughter – live. Valhalla is one of Odin's dwellings in this list:

> Glaðsheimr a fifth is called, there gold-bright Valhalla
> rises peacefully, seen from afar;
> there Odin chooses every day
> those dead in combat.
>
> It's very easy to recognize for those who come to Odin

to see how his hall's arranged;
the hall has spear-shafts for rafters, with shields it is thatched,
mail-coats are strewn on the benches.[23]

Later in the poem Odin provides more details about life in Valhalla. We learn that a wolf hangs in front of the western doors and an eagle flies above them (Stanza 10). Sæhrímnir, the pig who is called 'best of pork', is boiled every day, but 'few know by what the *einherjar* are nourished' (Stanza 18), and Odin, while feeding the wolves Geri and Freki, lives on wine alone (Stanza 19). There are 540 doors in Valhalla, and out of each 800 warriors will leave to fight the wolf at the end of the world (Stanza 23). A goat named Heiðrún stands on the roof of Valhalla, filling a vat with an everlasting supply of shining mead (Stanza 25). All these details are explained and elaborated in Snorri Sturluson's later description of Valhalla, which is based upon *Grímnismál*.[24] The conventional image of the Odinic paradise, with plentiful food and drink for the warriors who are chosen in anticipation of the great final battle of Ragnarök, derives from these descriptions. Many of these elements are not found in *Eiríksmál* or *Hákonarmál*, although the nature and function of Valhalla in all three poems is the same.

There may be no direct connection between the 'eddic' praise-poems and *Grímnismál*'s version of the Valhalla-complex: it is impossible to date *Grímnismál* with any accuracy, or even to tell whether it was originally a Norwegian or Icelandic poem. But it seems likely that it originates in a milieu broadly similar to those which produced *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. Like them, *Grímnismál* is an Odinic poem; like them it has a well-developed conception of what Valhalla was like and what it was for. If Valhalla did become a popular and meaningful myth among tenth-century Norwegian aristocracies, these same groups may have known *Grímnismál* or been involved in the preservation of the mythological traditions that underlie the poem. It may represent a different stage of the Valhalla tradition's development: its iconography is more vividly imagined and described in greater detail than we find in the Norwegian praise-poems. But it is impossible to guess whether this means that its composition took place before, during, or after the brief 'fashion for Valhalla' at the Haraldssons' courts. The image of Valhalla differs between the poems because the poems are different: *Grímnismál* is a purely mythological poem that both describes and takes place in the world of the gods, whereas *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* are poems that bridge the gap between the here and now and the eternal

structures of the mythological universe. They present Valhalla selectively in line with their poets' literary and political agenda; they reach out into the world of myth but do not seek to represent every detail of it in the way that *Grímnismál* does. They are 'eddic' in form, but together with *Hrafnsmál* they constitute a small and unique group of hybrid poems that manipulate myth in remarkable ways, all in the service of the poet's art and royal prestige.

EGILL'S *SONATORREK*

During the reign of Haraldr hárfagri, Iceland was settled. This development was to have profound consequences for the history of Old Norse literature and thus also of Scandinavian mythology. The sagas often portray Haraldr's tyranny as the most important factor that prompted Norwegians to leave home and seek a new life in a new country, one where they could exercise their traditional freedoms without the interference of a newly powerful king. This interpretation is likely to be only partly accurate, and reflects the patriotic agenda of authors in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – a period when relations between Icelanders and the kings of Norway were deteriorating fast – as much as the real motives that drove early settlers to the most remote corner of the Norse world.

As Haraldr's reign was a period of religious stability, there is no suggestion that religious concerns motivated the exodus from Norway. Early Icelandic pagan religion was presumably identical with Norwegian cults. From place-name evidence, it seems that Thor was the most popular god in Iceland, although individuals remained free to align themselves with any of the deities. The saga of Hrafnkell freysgoði ('Freyr's priest') has as its protagonist an early settler in the east of Iceland who had a formal function as a chieftain-priest (as in Norway, the pagan chieftain's role in early Iceland encompassed secular and sacred matters) and a great personal devotion to Freyr. He goes so far as to give half of his favourite horse, Freyfaxi ('Freyr-mane'), to the god, a dedication which partly determines the course of events that the saga describes. *Hrafnkels saga* does not tell us much about pagan worship, and like all the sagas it dates from well after the conversion to Christianity, but there is no reason to believe that Hrafnkell's relationship with his chosen god is not representative of early Icelandic religion generally.

Religion was a local, personal and variable affair – just as it had been in Norway – with no centralized institutions to promote or control an authorized version of paganism.

To begin with, Iceland was governed by a system that seems to have oscillated between anarchy and a sort of pseudo-democracy. Local land-owners (who, like Hrafnkell, were often also priests in the first decades of the settlement) became *de facto* lords over the inhabitants of their neighbourhoods, although they had no intrinsic right to this authority. The Icelanders, famously, had no king; as a corollary to that, Iceland possessed no centralized government, and no separate warrior caste to enforce the will of the ruling class. Disputes were settled by an often uneasy mixture of legal arbitration and deadly force, with feuds between leading families often lasting for years, and settled only when one party had run so short of men that they could not continue the fight. Icelandic society was unique in its lack of central authority at a time when many other European nations (including Norway) were moving quickly in the other direction – towards consolidated royal power and centralized administration.

I have suggested that the cult of Odin in Norway was particularly important and relevant in the aristocratic court circles surrounding Haraldr and his sons, and that this is reflected in the poetry that these courts produced. We might expect Odin to be less relevant in Iceland, therefore, where the farmer-chieftains would perhaps have been more interested in gods who could help them in their daily struggle against the island's harsh environment. But Odin was known and venerated in Iceland, although physical traces of his cult there are very scarce. He was particularly important to poets, and poets were particularly important to Iceland, where they arguably formed a cultural aristocracy of their own. Icelandic skalds were famous for their virtuosity, and over the course of the tenth century Icelanders came to dominate the poetical landscape of the whole Norse world: they replaced native Norwegians as the favourite poets of the Norwegian kings, and were also found serving rulers in Denmark and the British Isles. Of course, their contact with foreign courts changed their poetry. They adapted their verse to meet the requirements of their foreign patrons; their exposure to different cultural situations also broadened their poetic horizons. Their natural affiliation with Odin as a god of poetry would often chime well with the god's important place in aristocratic culture. Accordingly, Icelandic pagan skalds often appear as larger-than-life heroes,

who combine the artistic sensibility that Odin inspired with the other characteristics closely associated with this god: bravery and savagery, wisdom and madness.

The most quintessentially Odinic skald was Egill Skallagrímsson (c. 900–983), who has had a reputation as the greatest of all medieval Icelandic poets for as long as history records. A full biography of Egill is provided by the thirteenth-century saga that bears his name. According to *Egils saga*, Egill was of the first generation in his family born in Iceland; his grandfather, Kveld-Úlfr, was one of the chieftains who had fallen out with King Haraldr in the early years of his reign and relocated his household to the new settlement. Kveld-Úlfr was a truculent and troublesome man who was reputed to turn into a wolf after dark; his son, Skalla-Grímr, was no easier to get on with. He was taciturn and surly, prone to violent mood-swings and fits of rage, especially in the evenings. He was also a poet. Skalla-Grímr's second son, Egill, inherited many of his father's traits, including his aptitude for composing verse, which appears to have been inherent in him: the saga – which should certainly be taken with a pinch of salt at this point – describes Egill composing fully-formed stanzas in a complex metre at the age of three. It never mentions the young poet receiving instruction in his craft or practising and honing his skills over time; his genius is apparent from birth, and is perhaps even the result of divine inspiration.

Poetry is absolutely central to Egill's portrayal in his saga, which preserves many stanzas of what it claims to be his verse. In fact, the majority of them are likely to be fabrications produced long after Egill's death, designed to spice up the saga's prose or to add an air of verisimilitude to the story. Because of the uncertainty surrounding their composition, scholars have been rightly cautious about using most of Egill's poetry as a source of information about tenth-century religion or culture. *Egils saga*, however, does contain three long poems which are usually accepted as much older than the saga itself, and which may indeed be Egill's genuine compositions. The first of these long poems, *Höfuðlausn* ('Head Ransom'), is integral to a famous episode in the saga where Egill ends up at the court of his enemy, Eiríkr Haraldsson blóðøx (who by this time was in exile at York). Egill and Eiríkr had run into each other on several previous occasions in Norway, with the entirely understandable result that the king was sick of the rebellious young Icelander. The saga alleges that his queen, Gunnhildr, had laid a curse on Egill that had led to his falling into Eiríkr's clutches once more. In York,

Egill is to be executed. But his best friend Arinbjörn advises him to compose a poem in praise of the king that is so good that Eiríkr will be unable to refuse Egill his freedom without breaking Norse conventions of fairness and reciprocity. Egill has just one night in which to produce the poem, but when morning comes his 'Head Ransom' poem is so splendid that it does indeed save his neck.

Höfuðlausn is not really a mythological poem; nor is it – if we are being honest – Egill's best work. It does rather read like a hurried and half-hearted attempt to produce a poem that would just meet the minimum standards expected by the king. Clichés abound in its stereotyped descriptions of Eiríkr's victorious battles, in an unusual end-rhymed metre that is much simpler than the *dróttkvætt* ('court-metre') which was normally deemed fitting for poems about royalty. The mythological content of this poem is similarly conventional and uninspired: poetry is called 'Odin's mead' (Stanza 2) and 'Odin's sea of verse' (Stanza 19); a group of warriors is 'Odin's forest of oaks' (Stanza 8) – in skaldic kennings, any sort of tree can always stand for a man. Dead men are said to go to Loki's daughter, Hel (Stanza 10).[25] Beyond these brief references, the world of myth has no place in *Höfuðlausn*'s praise of the king. As we have already seen, King Eiríkr was associated with Odinic poetry in his memorial *Eiríksmál*, and so Egill's occasional use of Odin-kennings might be appropriate to the audience for which *Höfuðlausn* is intended. But Egill does not wish to over-praise the king, and he does not make any direct connection between Eiríkr and Odin. Perhaps he was reluctant to introduce his own patron deity into a poem in honour of his enemy. Compared to Egill's other major works, *Höfuðlausn*'s lack of religious or mythological content is certainly striking.

Egill's other long poems are perhaps the most remarkable and moving examples of the medieval skaldic tradition that have survived; they are certainly among the most personal. Whereas most skaldic verse in the pagan period was composed on demand to satisfy the demands of a chieftain's vanity or to show off at court, Egill – who was never an official court poet, although according to the saga he did spend some time in the service of the English King Athelstan – composed *Sonatorrek* ('The Loss of my Sons') and *Arinbjarnarkviða* ('Poem about Arinbjörn') out of no desire for personal gain or public adulation. Although we must bear in mind that the saga's account of the poems' composition may be the author's invention, in both cases the verse seems to fit in well with what the prose says about the circumstances in

which Egill composed it. *Arinbjarnarkviða* is a praise-poem of a rather unusual type: rather than being the normal sort of ego-boost that poets usually produced for their employers or important men whom they wished to impress, *Arinbjarnarkviða* is a touching tribute to Egill's best friend, Arinbjörn, a Norwegian who had become a leading figure in the retinue of Haraldr Eiríksson, one of the new rulers of Norway following the defeat of Hákon góði. By this time, Egill was living peacefully back home in the western fjords of Iceland; the saga suggests that he had heard of Arinbjörn's promotion in the new Norwegian court and sent the poem to him as a tribute. The saga does not specify how the poem was transmitted across the sea – presumably it would have been inscribed in runes, although no poem of similar length has been preserved in that medium.

Egill makes frequent reference in this poem to the adventures that he and Arinbjörn shared in their younger days, including the 'head-ransom' episode at York. He gives due credit to his friend for helping to save his skin in the face of Eiríkr's anger. Otherwise, he praises Arinbjörn's bravery and prowess in battle, his loyalty and his generosity. Egill states that, rather like King Hákon, Arinbjörn's honour will be remembered far into the future:

> His deeds will
> outlast most men's
> even those who are
> blessed with wealth;
> givers' houses are
> few and far between,
> a legion's spears
> need many shafts.[26]

The proverbial statements about the distance between the houses of generous men and the spears of a troop of men needing many shafts (which is rather difficult to interpret) recall the style of *Hávamál*, but there are no direct references to mythological poems in *Arinbjarnarkviða*. The gods, however, are mentioned directly when Egill attributes some of Arinbjörn's generosity to the gifts he has received from the Vanir fertility gods:

> All people
> watch in marvel
> how he sates
> men with riches;
> Freyr and Njörðr

have endowed
rock-bear [i.e. Arinbjörn]
with wealth's force. (Stanza 17)

It seems appropriate that these gods – traditional providers of prosperity in Norse pagan thought – should be chosen as the deities who presided over Arinbjörn's fortune.

The most interesting mythological allusion in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, however, is found in one of Egill's references to poetry. Egill conventionally refers to verse-making through kennings related to the Mead of Poetry myth. But in the sixth stanza of his poem, he uses a more than usually elaborate kenning that gives us a brief glimpse of the full mythic narrative underlying the reference:

Yet I ventured
my poem to the king,
the bed-prize that Odin
had slithered to claim,
his frothing horn
passed around
to quench
all men's ears.[27]

Odin's 'frothing horn' that 'quenches men's ears' plays on the dual nature of the skaldic conception of poetry, which is metaphorically a liquid but must actually be consumed aurally. It is a skilful and amusing variation on the usual theme of these kennings. But it is his reference to the 'bed-prize' which Odin had 'slithered to claim' that takes us properly back into the world of myth.

Although the myth of the Mead of Poetry features as a referent in skaldic kennings very frequently indeed – it is undoubtedly the most common way of mentioning verse and its composition in poetry of the pagan era – the full narrative that explains the origins of this kenning is only told in full in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda*.[28] Snorri presents a rather convoluted tale about how the two groups of warring gods, the Æsir and Vanir, solemnized a truce to end their conflict by mixing their spittle in a giant vat. Out of the resulting goo, the gods made a man named Kvasir, the wisest of all beings. Two dwarves killed Kvasir and drained his blood into two vats and a cauldron, mixing it with honey to create the mead that thereafter granted anybody who drank it skill in poetry or wisdom. All these elements of the

narrative are commonly found in skaldic kennings, where poetry is often called ‘Kvasir’s blood’ or ‘dwarves’ liquid’, or linked to the name of the cauldron in which the blood was hoarded.

Egill’s kenning, however, alludes to the second part of the story as Snorri tells it. A giant named Suttungr had obtained the precious mead as compensation after the dwarves killed his father; he put it for safe keeping inside a mountain called Hnitbjörg, and made his daughter, Gunnlöð, its guardian. One summer, Odin – in disguise and travelling away from home – came across Baugi, Suttungr’s brother, whose slaves Odin had killed in what seemed like an entirely random act of violence. In fact, Odin had a plan: he worked for Baugi in place of the dead slaves, stating that all he wanted as payment was a single sip of Suttungr’s mead. Suttungr refused, prompting Odin to resort to subterfuge. He drilled a hole into the side of Hnitbjörg, turned himself into a snake and slithered into Gunnlöð’s bedroom. She was the ‘bed-prize’ that Odin claimed: he slept with her for three nights, and each night she granted him a sip of mead in return. Unfortunately for her, Odin – who lives entirely on wine, according to *Grímnismál* – could hold his drink: each of his sips of mead drained one of the vessels to the last drop, and he turned himself into an eagle and sped off back to Ásgarðr, full to bursting with mead. This part of the story, says Snorri, explains why poets refer to poetry as ‘Odin’s booty and find, and his drink and his gift and the Æsir’s drink’.

While Snorri’s version is unique in combining the dwarves’ killing of Kvasir and the creation of the Mead of Poetry with an account of how Odin eventually retrieved it, the last part of the narrative is certainly not his invention. The Odinic eddic poem *Hávamál* includes a sequence of six stanzas that tells the story of Odin’s seduction of Gunnlöð. This part of *Hávamál* appears to focus on Odin’s sex life: in Stanza 102 he complains that:

> Many a good girl when you know her better
> is fickle of heart towards men;
> I found that out, when I tried to seduce
> that sagacious woman into shame;
> every sort of humiliation the clever woman devised for me,
> and I didn’t even possess the woman.[29]

Odin’s bitter meditations follow an account of his failed attempts to seduce a

woman known only as ‘Billingr’s girl’ (Stanzas 96–101), a story that is only found in *Hávamál*. Of course, the god was more successful with Gunnlöð, although his description of events seems to contain an admission that he had behaved badly in this encounter:

> Gunnlöð gave me from her golden throne
> a drink of the precious mead;
> a poor reward I let her have in return,
> for her open-handedness,
> for her heavy spirit.
>
> With the mouth of the auger I made space for myself
> and gnawed through the stone;
> over me and under me went the path of the giants [i.e. rock or mountain]
> thus I risked my head.[30]

Odin acknowledges that he has ‘made use of’ Gunnlöð by embracing her, and states that he would not have made it safely away from Suttungr’s hall if he had not done so (Stanzas 107–08). The episode concludes with Odin talking about himself in the third person and admitting that ‘he left Suttungr betrayed at the feast and made Gunnlöð weep’ (Stanza 110). Something of Odin’s duplicitous and amoral nature comes out in this story. It ties in well with his representation in the last of Egill Skallagrímsson’s major poems, *Sonatorrek*.

The reference to the mead of poetry myth in *Arinbjarnarkviða* shows that Egill was familiar with a version of the story similar to the one preserved in *Hávamál*, which adds to our impression that a body of primarily Odinic poetry circulated widely in the mid tenth century. Odin also dominates *Sonatorrek*, the memorial poem that Egill is said to have composed in memory of his two sons, who had both died within a short time of each other around 960. This poem is remarkable, however, not because of its mythic content, but because it is the best example of a *religious* poem that survives from the pagan North. In *Sonatorrek*, Odin is not a character in a narrative set in a far-off mythological universe; he is a brooding presence in the poet’s own thoughts and emotions. Nowhere else in Old Norse literature is the relationship between god and worshipper expressed so directly or personally. *Egils saga* does not tell us what role Egill’s religion played in his daily existence, but *Sonatorrek* gives us unparalleled access to the ambiguous and troubling place that Odin had in his imagination.

According to the saga, Egill had given up the will to live and refused to eat

following the death of his second son; he was wasting away. His daughter, Þorgerðr, tricks Egill into eating and drinking a little, and persuades him that he ought not to die before he has composed a suitable memorial to his sons in the form of a poem. He begins, but as he says at the start of *Sonatorrek*, he lacks inspiration and finds the task difficult:

> My tongue is sluggish
> for me to move,
> my poem's scales
> ponderous to raise.
> The god's prize
> is beyond my grasp,
> tough to drag out
> from my mind's haunts.[31] (Stanza 1)

The 'god's prize' which seems so elusive is of course poetry; each of the first three stanzas refers to the Mead of Poetry myth in a similar way. Egill also mentions that Bragi (presumably here the god of poetry) had a role in 'inspiring [poetry] with life' (Stanza 3), a detail which the standard version of the Mead of Poetry story lacks.

Sonatorrek is a *cri de coeur*, which deals with loss throughout: the loss of Egill's sons, brother and parents, but he also mourns the loss of his poetic skill in the lamentation with which (ironically and full of pathos) he begins one of the greatest of all Old Norse poems. At the outset his crisis is hardly a religious one, but Egill does make regular mythological allusions as he expresses his sorrows. His son Böðvarr died at sea, according to the saga, and Egill attributes this loss to the actions of the sea-goddess Rán and the 'brewer of waves', presumably her husband Ægir, who according to later myths is both the gods' brewer and a personification of the sea (Stanzas 7–8). Snorri tells us that Rán 'had a net in which she caught everyone who went to sea'.[32] It is unclear whether Egill really imagined these deities as responsible for Böðvarr's death, or whether they are simply poetic ways of referring to the sea.

Odin does not appear in *Sonatorrek* until the fifteenth stanza, which refers – rather grimly – to humankind as those 'who dwell beneath Odin's gallows'. This is another reference to the world-tree Yggdrasill and the myth of Odin's self-sacrifice: he imagines the tree rising up above the world of men, the mythological world looming and overshadowing the real world, much as Odin himself casts a shadow over Egill's life in the final third of the poem.

First Egill says that his other son, Gunnarr (who died of a fever), has now gone to Odin's hall:

> I do not relish
> the company of men
> though each of them might
> live in peace with me:
> my wife's son
> has come in search
> of friendship
> to One-Eye's hall. (Stanza 18)

Perhaps Egill is being ironic when he imagines Gunnarr seeking friendship at 'One-Eye's hall' (Valhalla). On the basis of poems like *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* we would not expect a young man who had died of natural causes to go and join Odin's elite *einherjar* warriors in Valhalla. Writing much later, Snorri Sturluson states that everybody who dies of sickness or old age must go to Hel, not to Odin. It is impossible to tell whether Egill took comfort from the idea that his son had joined the chief of the gods in the afterlife, but it is probably unlikely, since Egill also seems to blame Odin for taking Gunnarr away from him:

> I remember still
> when the Gauts' friend [i.e. Odin]
> raised high
> to the gods' world
> the ash that grew
> from my stock,
> the tree bearing
> my wife's kin [i.e. Gunnarr]. (Stanza 21)

We do not know why or how Odin has raised Gunnarr into the world of the gods, but Egill clearly thought Odin chose who would live and who die, without the associations with warfare that usually accompany this aspect of Odin's divinity.

Thinking about Odin's perceived part in his son's arbitrary and tragic loss leads Egill to reassess his relationship with his patron, the god who previously had provided him with the poetic inspiration that now comes to him so reluctantly:

> I was in league

with the lord of spears [i.e. Odin],
pledged myself loyal
to believe in him,
before he broke off
his friendship with me,
the guardian of chariots,
architect of victory.

I do not worship
Vilir's brother [Odin],
guardian of the gods,
through my own longing,
though in good ways too
the friend of wisdom
has granted me
redress for affliction.

He who does battle
and tackles the hell-wolf
gave me the craft
that is beyond reproach,
and the nature
that I could reveal
those who plotted against me
as my true enemies. (Stanzas 22–24)

Egill feels that he has been badly served by his god after having been loyal to him and worshipping him: the Old Norse word translated here as 'worshipped' derives from *blóta*, which often more specifically means 'to carry out pagan sacrifices'. At no point in his saga do we hear of Egill sacrificing to Odin, but there is no doubt that he had made him offerings of some sort.

One of the most intriguing statements in this part of *Sonatorrek* is that Egill worships Odin 'unwillingly'. It seems strange that a worshipper could be induced to continue in a god's service against his will, but we learn immediately afterwards why he might have done so: Odin has granted Egill good ways of obtaining 'redress for affliction' and given him 'the craft that is beyond reproach'. This must be an allusion to Egill's poetic skill, the skill which actually saves his life both at York and when he composes *Sonatorrek*, and which previously had brought him fame, wealth and influence. Like any good Viking-Age lord, Odin is generous with his gifts, but he demands

something in return. It seems that Odin finally demands of Egill too great a price in exchange for his talent: in Egill's mind, Gunnarr has become an involuntary human sacrifice, taken without warning by the capricious one-eyed god. Although he has to acknowledge that he has gained great benefit from his relationship with Odin in the past, Egill thinks that the bargain is no longer a fair one: if the loss of his son was the price he had to pay in exchange for his artistic gifts, there is no wonder that he made that sacrifice unwillingly. At the same time, he seems to realize that his debt with Odin had to be settled sooner or later.

Some scholars have inferred from *Sonatorrek* that Egill's relationship with Odin had already broken down before his sons' deaths. According to this interpretation, Odin has taken Gunnarr because Egill has in some sense failed to worship Odin sufficiently. It is true that Egill's great days as an Odinic warrior-poet were behind him by the time he composed *Sonatorrek*. No longer was he a dashing and romantic hero with psychopathic tendencies, his sword always at the ready and an insulting verse on his lips, despatching warriors to Valhalla all over the Norse world: by this point in his life Egill had settled down into the relatively conventional life of an Icelandic farmer-chieftain. Odin was less widely venerated in tenth-century Iceland than at the royal courts of Norway, and an Icelandic landowner, neither expecting nor needing victory in battle, furious bravery, or poetic inspiration, might have preferred to venerate Thor or Freyr. Egill had also been exposed to Christianity; while serving Athelstan in England, the king had insisted that Egill should 'take the sign of the cross', a reference to the rite known as *prima signatio*, a sort of preliminary baptism given to pagans who were on their way to being converted, before they had received Christian instruction. *Egils saga* claims that King Athelstan insisted on this ritual for any pagans who wished to mix with Christians in his realm, although they were allowed to follow whichever faith they preferred.[33] While it is unwise to place too much reliance on the veracity of the saga's account, Egill had travelled widely in areas which were in a state of religious flux or conflict. Although he in no way became an active Christian, it is possible that his apparent reluctance to go on worshipping Odin was partly a result of his exposure to different religions as well as his own changing circumstances.

Egill's break with Odin seems to have been final, with no prospect of their reconciliation. The last stanza of *Sonatorrek* is both melancholy and defiant, as the poet imagines his own death. He does not anticipate or even seem to

desire that he will go and join Odin and Gunnarr in Valhalla; even though he has been an active Odin-worshipper in his life, he does not expect to receive the reward of an afterlife in his god's company:

> Now my course is tough:
> Hel, close sister
> of Odin's enemy
> stands on the ness:
> with resolution
> and without remorse
> I will gladly
> await my death. (Stanza 25)

We should see the reference to Hel in this stanza as representing a personification of death: Egill does not necessarily believe that he will end up in Hel (a place which never occurs in pagan-era skaldic poetry, where the name Hel always denotes a mythological figure), but he is resigned to the fact of his own death. Indeed, in the absence of his family, he almost seems to desire it. He no longer speaks of Odin, from whom he expects no comfort or consolation, but realises that he is on his own in the face of eternity.

Sonatorrek is not primarily a mythological poem, although Egill's poetic vocabulary naturally includes kennings that depend upon mythological antecedents. Its importance is not as a source of mythic narratives or of new information about the gods; it does not make direct reference to any myths that survive in other contexts. But it provides a window into one man's religious sensibility that is found in such detail nowhere else in Norse poetry of the pagan period. It shows us that Odin, who is portrayed in an ambivalent light in many of the myths that describe his deeds, also had an ambivalent place in the hearts of his followers. He was perceived as having the power to grant men great gifts – victory to warriors, inspiration to poets – but he demanded great sacrifices in return. We have seen that Odin was more strongly associated with human sacrifice than any of the other gods; *Sonatorrek* shows us that these sacrifices had a human cost – not just for the dead, but also for the living.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have surveyed roughly the first hundred years of the surviving records of Old Norse poetry – a period of significant social and religious change. The reign of Haraldr hárfagri saw the unification of Norway and its concomitant consolidation of royal authority, as well as the beginnings of Norse settlement in Iceland. Following his death, the dynastic struggles that would come to dominate Norwegian history in the tenth century began with the conflict between his sons, Eiríkr blóðøx and Hákon góði. Religious tensions also began to surface in this period, as Hákon tried and failed to introduce Christianity into his realm.

The role of mythology in the poetic tradition seems to have developed over this period, too. Early skaldic verse could be used simply as a vehicle for telling stories about the gods, as the shield-poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlöng* attest. In the ninth century, many myths must have existed that now survive in the limited corpus of contemporary poetry only as references in kennings: the range of allusions to myth that we find in skaldic poetry is already broad. Yet the later eddas contain several narratives that are never mentioned by the earliest skalds – which is not to say, necessarily, that they did not exist. It is simply impossible to measure the extent of the whole mythology in a period where myth was mainly preserved in oral traditions now accessible to us only in scattered poetic remnants. It is notable, however, that many of the myths to which the earliest skalds allude are not found in full-scale eddic poems: the story of Thor and Miðgarðsormr is an exception. Poetry in the 'eddic metres' first appears in the three praise-poems – *Hrafnsmál*, *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* – that were composed respectively for Haraldr, Eiríkr and Hákon over the course of the first half of the tenth century. It is certainly possible that some of the texts that later came to make up the *Poetic Edda* were in existence at the same time. On the basis of the mythological content of contemporary skaldic poetry, it would seem that a poem related to *Hávamál* circulated in Norway in this period, and there are also correspondences between *Grímnismál* and the representation of Valhalla that is so important in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. Both *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*, like the 'eddic praise-poems', focus on Odin; it seems that Odin had, or attained, particular importance in the martial and aristocratic circles surrounding the Norwegian kings. It was at the courts of Haraldr and his sons that poets began to intertwine mythological allusions with political and cultural propaganda, praising the king by associating him with the chief of the gods. Odin was of special value to poets as well as to their patrons, as he

combined his role as bringer of victory and exemplum of royal power with the ability to bestow poetic inspiration upon his followers. These factors are sufficient to explain why Odin's important role in myth is disproportionate with the actual size of his cult, which was certainly much smaller than Thor's.

The other Norse deities were of course known in this period, and presumably many of them still had active cults but, apart from Odin, Thor and Loki are the only gods about whom full-scale mythic narratives survive in the earliest sources. The other gods occasionally have supporting roles in the narratives and more frequently feature as references in kennings. There is no sure evidence, however, that myths about Freyr, for example, or Baldr – who later plays such a central role in eddic mythology – were yet the subject of independent poetic compositions. Although allusions to Ragnarök do appear in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, it would be impossible to reconstruct the history of the mythological universe on the basis of the texts that survive from this first century of poetry: references to the Norse creation-myth are extremely scarce at this period, but people clearly did have some conception of what the end of the world would be like.

All of the poems that we have analyzed here were composed by pagan poets for pagan audiences. But Christianity had already appeared over the cultural horizon of parts of the North; individuals – like King Hákon – were already converting to the new religion; others were preparing to resist the incoming religion. So far, it has not had an identifiable impact on either the production or content of the skalds' poetry. But the seeds of political and religious turmoil sown during the reigns of Haraldr hárfagri's sons would germinate into full-blown conflict in the final decades of the tenth century. And, as we shall see in the following chapter, the growing antagonism between paganism and Christianity produced perhaps the most fertile period in the whole history of myth-making in medieval Scandinavia.

4

The Twilight of the Gods: The Age of Religious Conflict in Norway, c. 950–1000

In Hákon góði's day, we see the first notable signs of tension between paganism and Christianity in Norway. Hákon had managed to diffuse much of the early trouble through a pragmatic and largely laissez-faire attitude to religion. He built churches, but he did not destroy temples; he refused to join in sacrifices, but he did not persecute those who continued to worship the old gods. In part, his liberality towards the pagans was a matter of political expediency: the threat posed by the sons of Eiríkr blóðøx occupied much of his attention and prevented him from being more aggressive in promoting Christianity and suppressing pagan practices. He needed all his allies, regardless of their religion, in his struggle to retain control of Norway. The history of Norway in the second half of the tenth century is dominated by an ongoing dynastic struggle that had an important religious component. The two main families that fought for the throne also sought to impose their religion upon the whole of Norway. As we shall see, neither family was entirely successful in consolidating their power or ensuring the dominance of their religion. But this often bloody struggle characterizes the period: a fight between power groups who identified themselves as either pagan or Christian, and used religion – and myth – as a tool of their authority.

Following King Hákon's death, the most powerful person in Norway was perhaps Gunnhildr, Eiríkr's widow, the villainess of *Egils saga*. Her sons divided the kingdom between them, but their rule depended on the support of local chieftains. Haraldr hárfagri's united Norway was for the moment a thing

of the past. The leader of the Eiríkssons was Haraldr, known as *gráfeldr* (‘grey-cloak’), the oldest surviving son of the late king. Although this Haraldr was important enough to have a separate saga composed about him (*Haralds saga gráfeldar*, which is part of *Heimskringla*) – an honour not accorded to his father – Haraldr is not sympathetically described. He was regarded as a miser utterly dominated by his mother. His saga also suggests that he was a particularly weak king, who allowed the power of many petty rulers to grow unchecked and who was unable to enforce his will upon his subjects. Haraldr was also a Christian, but he had no more success in converting Norway than Hákon did:

> The sons of Gunnhildr had been baptized in England . . . But when they entered upon the government in Norway they had no success in converting the inhabitants, and all they accomplished was to destroy heathen fanes and to break up sacrifices, and this brought them much enmity.[1]

It is little wonder that Haraldr’s attempts failed when so many of Norway’s chieftains, who were absolute monarchs in their localities, were pagans who held Haraldr in contempt. One of his chief opponents was Sigurðr, earl of Hlaðir, who ruled the Trondheim region – the same Sigurðr who encouraged king Hákon to pay lip-service to pagan practices by blowing what he claimed was the sign of Thor’s hammer over his drink at a sacrificial feast. At Gunnhildr’s insistence, Haraldr allied with Sigurðr’s jealous younger brother, Grjótgarðr, who joined Haraldr in an attack on Sigurðr. They burned to the ground the hall where the earl was staying, killing him and all his entourage – a pragmatic but decidedly unheroic way of disposing of one’s adversaries which was rather popular in medieval Scandinavia.

As far as Norse poets were concerned, kings should be generous, brave and honourable. Haraldr gráfeldr was none of these things, and so it is perhaps not surprising that his entourage did not include many skalds. Eyvindr skáldaspillir, whose *Hákonarmál* was the late king Hákon’s lasting poetic memorial, was persuaded to serve Haraldr, though Haraldr had been Hákon’s sworn enemy. But Eyvindr’s relationship with his new patron was short and bitter. Although the saga records one conventional stanza in praise of Haraldr, he soon fell foul of the king by complaining about his tight-fistedness in verses that show more of the range of Eyvindr’s mythological knowledge:

> We, Ullr of the war-leek [i.e. warrior, Haraldr],

wore seed of Fýrisvellir [i.e. gold]
on hawks' hills [arms] through
all of Hákon's lifetime;
now the people's foe [Haraldr]
has hidden the flour
of Fróði's sad slave-girls [gold]
in the flesh of the mother
of the harmer of the giantess
[Thor; his mother is Jörð, earth].
The fading sun of the field
of Fyllr's eyebrows [gold] shone on
hills of the hull of Ullr [arms; Ullr's 'hull' is a shield]
in Hákon's time, for poets;
now is the stream's elf-circle [gold]
concealed – great the counsels
of mighty men – in the body
of the mother of the foe of giants [Jörð].[2]

Most of the allusions are to myths and legends connected with gold. Fýrisvellir ('Fýri's field') seems to refer to a legend about the Danish king Hrólfr kraki, who sowed the plain at Fýri with gold to distract his Swedish enemies as they pursued him. The 'meal of Fróði's mighty maiden' alludes to the story told in the poem *Grottasöngr* and *Snorra Edda* about a magical mill that would grind out whatever its owner desired: King Fróði, a descendent of Odin, enslaved two giantesses, who were set to work day and night grinding out gold. In the second stanza, the kenning translated as 'Fulla's fillet' must also mean 'gold', but it is very obscure. Snorri names Fulla as one of the goddesses of the pantheon, but he does not explain her connection with the precious metal. Eyvindr also mentions the gods Ullr – as part of a conventional 'god of war' equals 'warrior' kenning – and Thor, as part of kennings for the earth: King Haraldr is said to hide his loot in 'Thor's mother', Jörð.

Eyvindr's two verses use mythic references not to praise the king, but to condemn him; he does not call Haraldr a miser in so many words, but uses the double meanings of the kennings to obfuscate his true intent. He flatters Haraldr by calling him 'Ullr of combat', but undercuts this nugget of mythological praise by making it quite clear that he is not as generous as a king should be and by comparing him unfavourably to his predecessor, Hákon. But Eyvindr's language was not sufficiently opaque to escape Haraldr's notice, and relations between the poet and his new patron broke down at once. In an ironic inversion of the expected pattern – where a

generous lord rewards his loyal poet for honouring him in his compositions – the king demanded that Eyvindr give him a valuable arm-ring, a family heirloom, as recompense for the insult that he has received. Haraldr hardly comes out of this episode looking any less stingy. He and Eyvindr parted, and Eyvindr never served him again.

Haraldr may not have been the most generous of rulers, but there was at least one poet who remained happy to serve in his retinue. The Icelander Glúmr Geirason composed a whole poem in honour of the king. *Gráfeldardrápa* comprises thirteen stanzas now spread widely across several prose texts: no single saga contains all of them, which makes reconstructing the original form of the whole poem difficult. But Glúmr's poem is undoubtedly coloured by pagan traditions, in spite of Haraldr's professed Christianity. The poem opens with Glúmr begging silence so that he can begin 'the feast of the gods' ruler' – another reference to poetry as 'Odin's drink'.[3] Haraldr is called 'Odin of valuable-hilt's-metal' – a 'god of swords' or 'warrior', in other words.[4]

A more interesting mythological reference is found in another stanza of *Gráfeldardrápa* that is only preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*:

> It was victory-Týr himself there in the attacking elf of Atal's beasts. There were gods guiding that wind-beam Beimi.[5]

Both Atal and Beimi are included by Snorri in lists of king-names that could be substituted for each other in poetry. In the context of Glúmr's verse, they should probably be interpreted as 'Sea-Kings' or (possibly) 'Vikings', since the imagery implied by 'wind-beam Beimi' is certainly nautical. 'Atal's beasts' is recognizable as a type of ship-kenning, and their 'attacking elf' would therefore be a warrior who travelled by sea. The subject of this stanza is presumably Haraldr, although *Skáldskaparmál* does not give us this information. It seems to be part of a description of a battle – but we do not know which battle, since it is not found within the saga's narrative. If, as scholars usually accept, this stanza comes from near the end of the poem, its action actually takes place after Haraldr's death (which occurs in what is regarded as the ninth stanza). It would seem strange that Odin ('victory-Týr' – a quite common way of referring to the god, since he was so closely associated with success in battle) should be said to be 'in' a king when he had already fallen in battle; if the gods really were guiding him, they seem to have taken him in the wrong direction. There are three possible explanations

for this anomaly: perhaps Glúmr was talking about a different warrior at this point in the poem (Haraldr's killer, for example); alternatively, this stanza may make a veiled reference to the idea expressed in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* that death was to be welcomed, as it reflected the king's worthiness to be taken by Odin in the afterlife. The third – and probably most likely – possibility is simply that *Gráfeldardrápa* is too fragmentary to be reconstructed into a single sequence, and that this verse does not necessarily belong to the end of the poem. But in any case, Glúmr imagined the gods still had a crucial role in governing the course of events, and that Odin could in some sense manifest his will through the person of a king or warrior.

Glúmr's attitude towards his patron is naturally very positive: according to him, Haraldr was both generous and brave, which counteracts the bad press that Eyvindr's poetry had given him. Haraldr is called the 'free-handed giver of the river's fire [i.e. gold]' (Stanza 9) and the one who 'scattered gold and often was first and foremost in the fiercest storms of battle' (Stanza 13). So although Haraldr was not much of an enthusiast for poetry, as far as we can tell, he did have at least one skald whose job it was to ensure that his reputation was enhanced for posterity. Glúmr did his job by composing a very traditional memorial poem, using mythological references in a rather conventional manner, but without explicitly alluding to individual myths about the gods. It is hard to discern any real religious feeling in *Gráfeldardrápa*. Haraldr was nominally a Christian, according to the saga, and he might have been expected to disapprove of any pagan content in a poem about him. But while the king could choose a new religion if he wished, at this point Norse poets were still solidly rooted in pagan culture, and they made no postmortem concessions to their patrons' foibles. Just as Eyvindr treated Hákon góði to a full pagan memorial in *Hákonarmál*, Glúmr turned to pagan traditions in his poem celebrating Haraldr's life and achievements. Glúmr had been for a while a skald at the court of Haraldr's father, Eiríkr blóðøx; it seems that the old court poet felt that he could ignore a king's connection to the faddish new religion and speak of him in the same terms that previous poets had used to honour his ancestors. And since the king was dead, Glúmr no longer had to please the king in person: the audience that would hear *Gráfeldardrápa* remained a pagan one.

EARL HÁKON AND STATE PAGANISM

While both the royal dynasties of Norway – the Haraldssons and the Eiríkssons – dallied with Christianity in the middle of the tenth century, another power bloc developed in the north of the country, centred on the earldom of Hlaðir. As we have seen, relations between Hákon góði and Earl Sigurðr of Hlaðir were cordial, as the earl worked to soften the king's opposition towards pagan worship. But Haraldr gráfeldr had Sigurðr killed, although not for religious reasons. Sigurðr's son, Hákon, succeeded his father to the earldom in about 962. Through a succession of alliances, Hákon's power quickly grew as he attempted to avenge his father's death: Hákon had plotted together with Haraldr Gormsson, king of Denmark, and his nephew Gull ('gold')-Haraldr Knútsson, and between them they conspired to have Haraldr gráfeldr killed. Hákon Sigurðsson never claimed or seemed to desire the title of king – he is always referred to as Jarl ('earl') Hákon – but for a while following Grey-Cloak's death he was undoubtedly the most powerful man in Norway. According to *Fagrskinna*, he owed his position to Haraldr Gormsson's patronage. He could rule the whole country, but had to pay tribute to the Danish king – in effect, he was Haraldr's tenant, although it seems that Haraldr had little involvement in the day-to-day administration of Norway.

In the medieval sagas, Jarl Hákon is a remarkable figure: sometimes noble and brave, sometimes treacherous and cowardly. It is difficult to know whether audiences would have viewed him as a hero or villain of Norwegian history. *Fagrskinna* introduces him in ambivalent terms:

> Hákon was a very good-looking man, and more courtly than most other men; he was of medium height. He had luxuriant hair and beard, was a man of abilities of many kinds, well-spoken, deep, patient, cruel to his enemies both in overt schemes and in secret stratagems, with a long memory for grievances, generous with money.[6]

Hákon's other most notable characteristic – and the reason why his reign is such an important period in the history of Norse religion and mythology – was his paganism. The reign of Haraldr gráfeldi had been marked by a succession of poor seasons in Norway, with the herring catch failing and the grain spoiled by bad weather. According to *Fagrskinna*, 'the country people attributed [the famine] to the anger of their gods and the fact that the kings had had their sacrificial sites destroyed'.[7] Hákon seems to have been

determined not to make the same mistake. Once he had seen off the Eiríkssons and established himself as lord over Norway,

> he began to perform sacrifices more aggressively than before. Then the seasons became more propitious, grain became plentiful again, the earth blossomed . . . Then there was good peace with this fruitfulness . . . From this it can be heard that the sons of Eiríkr destroyed the rituals, but Hákon re-established them.[8]

This account is apparently supported by contemporary poetry, in which the praise of the pagan king's success in returning peace and prosperity to the land is couched in exuberantly mythological language. For example, two verses by Einarr Helgason skálaglamm ('scales-tinkle' – the nickname is extremely obscure) contrast the behaviour of the Christian Eiríkssons with Hákon's enthusiastic participation in the gods' cults:

> Gamli's kin [i.e. the Eiríkssons] once kept the country
> – on that the word of trees of war-panes [i.e. warriors] touches
> – they dared to damage temples.
> Now, the best of all lords,
> the battle-bold Ullr of spears' causeway [i.e. Hákon],
> is settled in the seat of the stalwart princes.[9]

If we think back to the end of *Hákonarmál*, we recall that Hákon góði, though a Christian, gained credit for having respected the holy places of pagan worship; but Haraldr gráfeldi did just the opposite. In contrast, Einarr credits Hákon with not merely respecting the Norwegians' cult sites, but with reviving their religious practices:

> Useful to men, the Æsir's off spring [i.e. men]
> return to rituals;
> the mighty master of the red board
> of Hlökk's meeting [i.e. Hákon] wins glory.
> Now the earth is growing again;
> the wealth-destroyer [Hákon]
> lets happy spear-bridge envoys [i.e. warriors/men]
> inhabit the gods' temples.[10]

Observing pagan rituals had become a matter of public policy, it seems, and the results were immediate and effective, leaving the people of Norway prosperous and happy once more. It is no accident that Einarr calls the Norwegians the 'off spring of the Æsir': he wishes to emphasize the connection between the people and their gods, with the king acting as an

intermediary. The common bond between people, king and deities is reinforced when Einarr later calls Hákon ‘the gods’ kinsman’ (Stanza 32). He refers to Hákon using traditional warrior-kennings and emphasizes his generosity, but these tropes are not merely the sometimes insincere platitudes of praise-poetry. Hákon was directly involved with the religious life of his subjects, and the mythological allusions in Einarr’s verse draw attention to his dynamic participation in securing their prosperity by his ability to intercede with the gods.

Hákon was actually baptized at the insistence of the Danish king, to whom he supposedly owed loyalty: he also promised to allow Christianity to be preached throughout Norway. But it is fair to say that Hákon’s heart was not in his ‘conversion’, since everywhere that he found Haraldr’s missionaries spreading the good news he immediately re-converted the people to their old ways, in an ironic inversion of medieval conversion-narratives:

Jarl Hákon made everyone change to heathen sacrifices wherever he went, and promised them his protection, and many made heathen sacrifices who had previously accepted baptism, as is said here:

> At once, wise, he enabled
> honour of all Einriði’s
> ravaged famed temple grounds,
> and the gods’ sacred places.[11]

This is Stanza 15 from Einarr’s *Vellekla*. Einriði, whose ‘temple grounds’ are honoured, is an alternative name for Thor, whose cult was probably most widespread among farmers and seafarers. If we take this verse at face value, we can tell that Hákon was not only concerned with promoting or safeguarding Odin’s cult – the one with which he, as warrior-king, would be expected to associate himself. He was interested in the religion of the people and in the gods who secured peace and prosperity for the whole nation.

Hákon’s religious policy was a reactionary one. It was a reaction against the incursions that Christianity was making in Norway under the Danish king’s influence; it was also a way to set himself apart from the Haraldssons and Eiríkssons who had attempted to suppress pagan rituals. The famine that had afflicted Norway under Haraldr gráfeldi gave him an opportunity to assert the superiority of the old gods and to participate directly in the land’s renewal. The medieval historians who describe his reign may not have believed that Hákon’s return to sacrificing in fact produced these desirable

results, but they relate that Norwegian pagans did think so: in the second half of the tenth century people still believed that it was possible to propitiate the gods through rituals, and that these acts would have positive outcomes, especially if they were sanctioned and promoted by the ruler.

Circumstances were favourable for Hákon's 'counter-conversion' to succeed; but if Christianity had not made inroads into Norwegian society and been perceived as failing to meet the country's needs, his policy would not have been necessary. It should be noted, however, that Hákon did not actively persecute Christians, as far as the sources tell us. His attitude was pro-pagan, rather than strictly speaking anti-Christian, as his willingness to be baptized attests. Paganism was considered pragmatically superior to Christianity: it was not necessarily a higher spiritual truth, and the two religions were not mutually exclusive. A person could choose one over the other based upon the perceived benefits that the religion would bring. As we shall see in the next chapter, this attitude was common among both pagans and Christians during the era of conversion. Christianity and paganism were alike in kind, but different in their effects; the proponents of each side sought to convince the other that their way was better.

Hákon decisively chose paganism and turned that choice to his political ends. Allowing and encouraging sacrifices was his most important practical step, but he also legitimized his own authority by what we might call religious propaganda. His court skalds were his mouthpiece on these matters.

Jarl Hákon employed an unprecedented number of poets: the thirteenth-century *Skáldatal* names nine of them. In contrast to his predecessors' poets, Hákon's skalds composed long poems in honour of the king while he was still alive. These praise-poems therefore address his contemporaries rather than posterity. They promote a positive image of the earl, asserting his right to govern – which was crucially important in Norway, where competing factions frequently attempted to usurp Hákon's power. They also reassure his subjects that the right man was in charge, a ruler who deserved to rule and who could be relied upon for protection and support.

Hákon's poets constantly promote the earl's image by making direct links between him and the pagan gods and their worship. We have already seen that Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla* asserts that Hákon's religious policy brought peace and prosperity to the land, and his separate stanza about the earl explicitly contrasts his success with the failures of his Christian predecessors. It is an exercise in public relations that sounds like it could be

the work of a modern spin-doctor: things were worse in the past – for which we blame the other party, who are now in opposition. But things have now got better – for which we take the credit ourselves. Religion was one area in which the two parties were most clearly different from one another, and thus it was, potentially, a particularly fruitful source of political capital.

Poets also used mythological references to contribute to their idealization of Hákon. Eyvindr skáldaspillir – who had served the previous Hákon, and fallen out with Haraldr gráfeldi – came out of retirement to compose a swan-song in honour of the earl. We have already seen that Eyvindr was proficient in manipulating mythological imagery to honour a king and promote his good reputation: *Hákonarmál*, with its allusions to eddic poetry and ambivalence towards Odin and King Hákon's relationship with him, is one of the most sophisticated pieces of mythological poetry to have survived. When Eyvindr came to compose a poem in honour of this other Hákon, his agenda was similar: he proclaims Hákon's rightful royal status and legitimizes his authority by linking him to the gods. This poem, which survives in fragments spread across several different texts, is called *Háleygjatal* ('Catalogue of the Háleygir', composed around 985) and it is – if we are to be honest about it – a fairly straightforward rip-off of *Ynglingatal*, in which Þjóðólfr of Hvinir had traced Haraldr hárfagri's descent. If Eyvindr's nickname does mean 'plagiarist', it might be because of this poetic theft. But while the poem's basic form and metrical structure seem to imitate *Ynglingatal – Háleygjatal* is also a catalogue of the ruler's ancestors, although it is less obsessed with their deaths than *Ynglingatal* is – its language and range of mythological allusions is more sophisticated and varied than Þjóðólfr's work.

As scholars now see it, *Háleygjatal* begins by stating Hákon's relationship to the gods. The poem's most likely first stanza sounds very much like a traditional introduction to a praise-poem:

> I desire silence for Hár's ale [i.e. poetry]
> while I raise Gillingr's payment [i.e. mead (of poetry)],
> when we trace his descent to the gods
> in the pot-liquid [mead] of gallows-cargo [Odin, hence poetry].[12]

Eyvindr was something of a specialist on Odin, as we saw in *Hákonarmál*, and here he shows knowledge of different names (Hár) and kennings ('gallows-cargo') for the chief of the Æsir as well as the story of the mead of poetry. He states here that Hákon is actually descended from the 'gods'. Thus

when he places Odin and the giantess Skaði at the head of the Háleygir family tree he asserts that the blood of mythological beings runs through Hákon's veins (Stanza 2, which is found only in *Heimskringla*):

> The descendent of the Æsir [Odin], shield-worshipped,
> begat the earl with the denizen of Ironwood [a giantess],
> when that renowned couple – the friend of men [Odin] and Skaði –
> dwelt in the home of the maid of the bone of the sea [Skaði]:
> and the lady of the ski [Skaði] had many sons with Odin.[13]

Eyvindr makes Hákon a direct descendent of Odin's union with another mythological figure, but he does not transmute the Æsir into mortals: he does not describe Odin's death. (All of the ancestral figures in Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal*, on the other hand, are human.) Hákon at once becomes more god-like through this connection; indeed, his family takes its place in the world of myth, transcending their mortal status and surpassing Haraldr hárfagri's dynasty in their closer link to divinity. The sexual relationship between Odin and Skaði produced 'many sons'; it is they who become the mortal subjects of the poem. In this stanza there is also a tantalizing possible reference to a form of pagan worship. Odin, who is called 'friend of men' – a title that he does not always deserve on the basis of his appearance in other sources – is said to be 'shield-worshipped' in a compound word that includes the *-blóta* element which usually denotes a sacrifice. This reference has a counterpart in the Odinic eddic poem *Hávamál*:

> I know an eleventh [spell] if I have to lead
> loyal friends into battle;
> under the shields I chant, and they journey inviolate,
> safely to the battle,
> safely from the battle,
> safely they come everywhere.[14]

Echoes of these verses are also found in Eyvindr's earlier poem, *Hákomarmál*. It is difficult to know whether this type of battle-magic should really be regarded as a form of 'sacrifice', but *Hávamál* at least supports the idea that shields had a place in Odinic ritual, and reinforces the connection between the cult of Odin and the warrior class.

Odin pervades *Háleygjatal*. Eyvindr alludes to the myth of Odin's self-sacrifice in Stanzas 4 and 5, in which one Guðlaugr, hanged by his enemies, is said to ride 'the grim steed' and 'Fjöllnir's tree': Fjöllnir is another well-

known name for Odin. But Odin is not the only god in *Háleygjatal*; in one of two verses about Jarl Hákon's father, Sigurðr, the nobleman is called 'Týr's kinsman' (Stanza 10). As we have seen, the cult of Týr was hardly present at all in Viking-Age Norway, and references to Týr in skaldic poetry use his name as an alternative to a generic word for 'god', most commonly in man-kennings. This occurrence is probably no exception: Týr is simply a representative of the Æsir, and Eyvindr provides no other mythological connotations for him. But Eyvindr's message seems to be inclusive: Hákon's family is well-connected to all the gods, and not just to Odin. A more distant ancestor, Hákon Gjótgarðsson, is called 'Freyr's heir' (Stanza 7); Yngvi-Freyr is also mentioned in Stanza 11, and Russell Poole has proposed that Njörðr is missing from Stanza 10 only because of a scribal error.[15] All these gods are associated with fertility. The range of mythological figures mentioned in *Háleygjatal* encompasses both sides of Hákon's role as divinely endorsed leader of the Norwegian people: as a successful warrior, he had a connection with Odin; but Odin would not have been the god expected to bring about the fertility and prosperity with which Hákon's reign was associated. Even in its current, incomplete form *Háleygjatal* suggests that the attitude of Hákon, his family and circle towards the different gods was liberal and not dogmatic. Odin does not wholly dominate the religious worldview of this poem in the way that he does in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*.

The twin themes of victory and prosperity, and the entwined roles of king and the gods in ensuring both, occur again and again in the poetry of Jarl Hákon's reign. *Vellekla* shows how the gods were thought to control the outcome of battles:

> He piled the fields with corpses,
> the lord of Fróði's storm [i.e. warrior, Hákon],
> the son of the gods rejoiced in victory,
> Odin received the slain.
> What doubt can there be but that
> the gods control the destroyer of the race of princes?
> I say that the most mighty gods
> strengthen Hákon's authority.[16]

This verse is perhaps the clearest indication yet of the way Hákon's poets saw their patron's relationship to the gods. The earl, who is of the gods' kindred, is a conduit for their will and power. His success is divinely pre-ordained. The power that he wields over Norway is his by right, and the gods

themselves ‘strengthen his authority’. This stanza articulates in a remarkably direct way the religious ideology that underlies Hákon’s rule. Everything that he does carries the stamp of divine approval. The poets represent Hákon as so closely attuned to the wishes of the gods that he almost becomes one of them even before his death.

SEX AND SACRAL KINGSHIP

If Hákon was descended from the gods and if Norway depended for its peace and prosperity upon his involvement in the religious life of the people, we might well be tempted to think that a sort of ‘sacral kingship’ underlay his authority. As we have seen, scholars have sometimes argued that members of the Yngling dynasty – the family line to which Haraldr hárfagri claimed to belong – had in prehistoric times been the focus of similar cultic activity: kings were thought to be personally responsible for the land’s fertility, owing to their direct connection to divine powers whose authority they embodied. In fact, the evidence that a sort of sacral kingship operated in Norway during Hákon’s reign is stronger than for the earlier Yngling kings, although it remains liable to over-interpretation. Hákon is presented in the sources as having an unusually close bond with the gods, but it is more significant that the mythological figures with which he was associated seem particularly relevant to a cult which prized both agricultural and sexual fertility.

The religious significance of sex within the pagan Norse worldview is suggested by the phallic representations of Freyr unearthed by archaeologists, which we interpret by comparison to Adam of Bremen’s description of the temple of Uppsala. Freyr’s sister, Freyja, was renowned as a love-goddess. Both Freyr and Freyja were of the Vanir, whose role may have extended beyond making the crops grow into the realms of human sexuality and reproduction (although the cultic evidence for this is scarce). With Hákon, as he is represented in some contemporary poetry and later literary sources, we find a similar equation: his sexuality takes on a mythic dimension and is connected to his successful rule over a prosperous Norway.

Historians tell us that Hákon had a way with women; probably it would be better to say that he had away with them. *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* record that towards the end of his reign, Hákon’s lust had got the better of

him, and was causing dissatisfaction among his subjects:

> During the time Earl Hákon ruled over Norway there were good harvests, and a good peace reigned within the land among the farmers. For the greater part of his life the earl was popular with them. But as time wore on it occurred very often that he became licentious in his intercourse with women. He went so far as to abduct the daughters of powerful chieftains and to have them brought to his residence, where he lay with them for a week or two before sending them home. This brought him bitter resentment of the kinsmen of these women, and the farmers began to murmur menacingly, as is the wont of the people of Trondheim if anything displeases them.[17]

Of course, this does not tell us that there was anything 'sacral' about Hákon's sexual misdeeds or that anybody – the earl included – necessarily believed there to be a connection between this behaviour and the good harvests that made him so popular. There is nothing particularly godly about this abuse of his power.

If we turn to the poetry that his skalds produced, however, imagery that combines sexual and mythological aspects is sometimes quite prominent. The clearest example is the *Hákonardápa* ('Poem about Jarl Hákon') by the Icelander Hallfreðr Óttarsson, which was probably composed towards the end of the earl's reign (c. 990), at the height of his power. This *Hákonardrápa* – which is preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* – is a superficially conventional praise-poem about Hákon's victorious progress as he defeated his enemies and brought the whole of Norway under his sway. Hallfreðr describes Hákon's victory symbolically, using identical imagery in four of the poem's nine stanzas. In each, Hákon's conquest of Norway is represented in sexual terms; he is a husband who takes possession of the feminized land as if it were his wife:

> The keen wind-steed-taker [i.e. Hákon] lures under himself with the true language of swords [battle] the pine-haired deserted wife of Þriði [Odin; his wife is Jörð]. (Stanza 3)
>
> So I think the famed distributor [Hákon] – land comes under the necklace-diminisher [Hákon] – very reluctant to leave Auðr's splendid sister [Jörð] alone. (Stanza 4)
>
> The match was later consummated by which that wise-ruling king's crony [Hákon] married the tree-grown only daughter of Onar [Jörð]. (Stanza 5)
>
> The guider of harbour-horses [Hákon] managed to draw to himself Báleygi's broad-faced bride [Jörð] by the politics of steel [battle]. (Stanza 6)[18]

The mythical personification of earth, Odin's wife Jörð, becomes Hákon's property in each stanza. But he does not merely 'own' her; he takes

possession of her in an explicitly sexual way that is just shy of being sexually explicit. In Stanza 5, the marriage between lord and land is ‘consummated’ – Hákon and Norway become bridegroom and bride. Their courtship, however, is not particularly romantic: Hákon does not so much woo Jörð as take her by force, speaking with the ‘language of swords’ and capturing her through the ‘politics of steel’. Although these verses are of course meant to glorify Hákon’s power and potency, they also sound uncomfortably in tune with his reputation as an unscrupulous seducer. Hallfreðr does not state that Norway gave the earl her consent.

Some scholars have seen traces of a *hieros gamos* (‘divine marriage’) in Hallfreðr’s portrayal of Hákon’s relationship with his ‘bride’. At its most basic level, the *hieros gamos* is the marriage of two deities, perhaps most famously applied to the nuptials of Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology. Odin’s marriage to Jörð – though she is not strictly speaking a goddess – would also fit into this category. As with many myths, *hieros gamos* may also have had a ritual correlative – some form of ceremony in which a god’s worshippers could re-enact the sacred marriage in order to bring about a desired outcome. *Hieros gamos* rituals are normally associated with and designed to promote fertility.

Norway’s forced marriage to Hákon plausibly can be interpreted as a *hieros gamos*. The earl was represented as a member of the gods’ family, who could stand in for Odin; there was a well-known mythological antecedent in the story of Odin’s marriage to the earth; fertility was one of the main concerns of Norwegian cults at this period. Nor is Hallfreðr the only poet to mention Hákon’s relationship with his land in sexualized terms; Eyvindr’s *Háleygjatal* concludes with a very similar image:

> [Hákon], under whose hand
> all the bride of the Týr
> of slaughter [Odin; his bride is Jörð] lies,
> eastwards to the home of the Egðir.[19]

Eyvindr’s verse lacks the eroticism of *Hákonardrápa*, but its message is the same.

There was certainly a fashion for describing Hákon’s power in sexualized terms. Possibly poets were influenced by pre-existing myths of the gods’ sexual relationships when they chose to represent him as Norway’s lover (or rapist); but there is no solid evidence that these poems describe an actual rite

of ‘sacral kingship’ in which Hákon was formally or symbolically married to the land. As Roberta Frank has pointed out, Hákon’s sexualized ownership of his realm is a conventional and widespread poetic metaphor – it is really concerned with power, rather than sexuality, and these poems do not require a ritual context for them to function effectively as praise for the earl.[20] The simple fact that the earth was conceived as feminine in the pagan Norse worldview lends itself to gendered and then sexualized imagery. Conquering the land is equated with gaining possession of a woman; the poets use mythological allusions in describing Hákon’s conquest, but that is not the same thing as stating that his seduction or rape of Norway was actually a sacred act. It adds to his reputation as a powerful and potent ruler, and asserts that he has a close and perhaps loving bond with his country, but without any positive evidence it is impossible to say whether his ‘seduction’ of the land had any objective reality in Norwegian religious life. As Eyvindr and Einarr describe it, Hákon’s licentiousness is a product of poetic licence.

There is, however, one further piece of evidence that may suggest that the idea of the *hieros gamos* had greater significance to Hákon than a mere technique by which skalds hoped to flatter the earl’s ego (and his libido). There is evidence that the people of Hálogaland, Hákon’s native region, venerated a female mythological figure named Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr. In much later medieval sagas, Jarl Hákon is called Þorgerðr’s husband (*bóndi*) and he is said to have loved her.[21] Several stories survive which make Þorgerðr Hákon’s patroness, and describe how she was worshipped by the earl and his followers. It should be noted, however, that all of these narratives date from long after Norway’s conversion to Christianity, and that none of Hákon’s skalds explicitly refer to Þorgerðr, as we might expect them to do if they placed so much emphasis upon the king’s religious role and his sexual prowess. Of Hákon’s poets, only Tindr Hallkelsson mentions a figure that could be identified with Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, in the ambiguous first verse of his *Hákonardrápa*:

> It was not as if a beautiful jewel-Gerðr [i.e. woman]
> made a bed for the jarl
> in her shoulder-branches [arms]:
> a clash of Fjöllnir’s fires [swords] arose.[22]

In this stanza Tindr emphasizes the fierceness of battle by comparing it to the image of the earl lying in a beautiful woman’s arms. While it conceivably

might allude to Hákon's reputation as a lady's man, some scholars have given this verse a mythological or religious significance that does not stand up to scrutiny. Although 'jewel-Gerðr' does share an element with Þorgerðr's name, it is an ordinary sort of kenning in which the name of a female mythological figure – Gerðr is the giantess with whom Freyr falls in love in the eddic poem *För Skírnis* – combined with a characteristically feminine attribute or accoutrement (here jewellery) simply means 'a woman'. As we have seen so often before, these verses use mythological referents to describe normal things; there is no religious content, and it seems very unlikely that the poet thought of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr when he composed it.

It is therefore curious that a figure who is absent from contemporary poetic sources became so closely identified with Jarl Hákon in later writings. The post-conversion evidence about Þorgerðr is so scattered and inconsistent that we do not even know whether she was thought of as a god, a giantess, or some sort of legendary ancestress-figure of the Háleygir family who gradually became the focus of a cult among her descendents. *Snorra Edda* supports the last of these interpretations:

> They say that a king known as Hölgi, after whom Hálogaland is named, was Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr's father. Sacrifices were offered to them both, and Hölgi's grave-mound was raised afterwards with alternately a layer of gold or silver – this was the money offered in sacrifice – and a layer of earth and stone.[23]

'Hölgabrúðr' could mean 'Hölgi's woman', but the *-brúðr* element also might be interpreted as 'bride', in which case Snorri has mistaken the relationship between Þorgerðr and Hölgi. But Snorri certainly thought that she belonged to legendary history, rather than mythology *per se*. According to this interpretation, her worship in Hákon's circle would fit in with the earl's interest in tracing his ancestry back to legendary or divine figures – as exemplified by *Háleygjatal*. The similarity of the name 'Hölgi' to 'Hálogaland' and the Háleygir family name locates her firmly within Hákon's own region and explains why she was particularly venerated there and not elsewhere in Norway.

The other sources, however, do not even agree about the correct form of her name. Þorgerðr is variously called 'Höldabrúðr', 'Hörgabrúðr' and 'Hörgatröll' in different sagas. She appears in several different episodes, which mostly agree only on the place that she (or a figurative representation of her) occupied in pagan temples. In *Njáls saga*, the villainous Vígr

(‘killer’)-Hrappr enters a temple belonging to Jarl Hákon and steals a precious headdress and a golden arm-ring from Þorgerðr’s idol. The temple also contains statues of Thor and an obscure goddess named Irpa who seems to have been thought of as a pair with Þorgerðr; Hrappr desecrates these idols too. Finally, he removes all of the statues from the temple and sets fire to it. A similar ending occurs in *Harðar saga* in which Grímkell, a relative of Jarl Hákon who had immigrated to Iceland, burns down Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr’s temple after she refuses to grant good luck to his family and makes discouraging prophecies. In this account Þorgerðr herself inhabits the temple rather than being represented by an idol. She has the power to grant good fortune, and her prophecies come true: after Grímkell burns down the temple, he dies almost straight away, just as she had predicted.

Þorgerðr is found most often in a series of narratives in *Flateyjarbók* that centre on the figure of Óláfr Tryggvason, Hákon’s Christian nemesis in the last part of his reign and his successor as Norway’s ruler. As in the two saga-episodes mentioned above, Þorgerðr’s place is in a temple in the middle of a forest. In the first of *Flateyjarbók*’s references to her, Hákon and his friend Sigmundr visit such a temple where Þorgerðr’s idol is the most splendid and important of all the deities. They make an offering of silver to her, and in return she grants Sigmundr a ring, symbolizing her protection over him in the future. Then, Hákon seeks intercession from her to aid him in his battles against the Jómsvíkingar, a band of pirates. But Þorgerðr refuses to help until Hákon agrees to placate her with human sacrifice: in the end he agrees to kill his young son. Þorgerðr keeps her bargain, and sends a great hailstorm upon the kings’ enemies before joining the Norwegians’ ranks, shooting arrows from her fingertips. Irpa accompanies her on the battlefield, and here she is called Þorgerðr’s sister. This story was quite well known as late as the thirteenth century, it seems, since references to the magical hailstorm and Þorgerðr’s part in the battle occur in poems by Þorkell Gíslason (*Búadrápa* (c. 1200), Stanzas 9 and 10) and the Icelandic bishop, Bjarni Kolbeinsson (*Jómsvíkingadrápa* (before 1222), Stanzas 30 and 32).

In *Flateyjarbók*, Þorgerðr and her cult are finally destroyed after Jarl Hákon’s death, as the saga describes his successor, Óláfr Tryggvason, visiting her ‘magnificent house’ in the forest clearing, stripping the precious clothes with which Hákon had adorned her idol and dragging it behind his horse. Óláfr tests his men to see if they still paid the figure of Þorgerðr unwonted respect, but they all exhibit contempt towards this symbol of

paganism, even when she is put back in her fine clothes and displayed with her gold and silver all about her. The king bashes the statue into pieces and has it burned, along with an idol of Freyr that he had taken from another temple.

These narratives do not bring us very much closer to the historical reality of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr's cult during Hákon's reign. They are all likely to have been greatly elaborated for the amusement of Christian audiences, even if they were not simply fabricated long after the conversion. But there is, of course, a chance that these stories contain traces of much older beliefs and practices, in which case it is possible to draw a few tentative conclusions from them about her nature and function. It seems likely to me that Þorgerðr's reputation as a patron deity derives from her status as an ancestral figure in the Háleygir dynasty, which explains why her cult is restricted to Hákon's family and circle: there is no evidence to suggest that she attracted widespread or popular devotion. Her role was to protect and advise the earl and his friends; she could intervene directly in people's affairs and make prophecies that would be bound to come true. For her protection and assistance, she had to be propitiated with offerings – normally of money, but in one episode she demands a human sacrifice. A specific place of worship – a temple in a wood – was particularly associated with these offerings, and in this temple Þorgerðr was represented by a beautiful and impressive statue, always dressed in the utmost finery. She could be worshipped alongside other idols, but was apparently sometimes considered to be their superior. Although her name combines two mythological elements – the god Thor and the giantess Gerðr – there is no evidence that she was ever considered one of the Æsir. Jarl Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr is supposed to have been particularly close. As a particularly local 'deity' she might have been a good candidate to participate – perhaps as a symbolic representation of Hálogaland – in the *hieros gamos* with which Hákon is so often associated. Some scholars have connected Þorgerðr with sex and fertility – as a local version of the Vanir fertility goddess Freyja, perhaps – but this interpretation probably reads too much into the *-brúðr* ('bride') element of her name and a single reference to Hákon as her husband. There is no evidence that sex actually played a part in her worship (although her idol does seem to end up undressed when men desecrate her shrine). Nor do her followers seem to have received the conventional benefits associated with fertility cults: neither prosperity, nor agricultural fertility, nor procreative fecundity is achieved by

praying or sacrificing to Þorgerðr.

Although from the surviving sources Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr might seem to be a rather peripheral figure, she fits in well with the religious atmosphere surrounding Jarl Hákon as we are able to perceive it from historical accounts of his reign and contemporary skaldic poetry. Even if Hákon's rulership was not, strictly speaking, 'sacral', the sort of paganism practised in his circle concentrated much religious power in the earl's person. As expressed and affirmed through his ancestral connection to the gods, his involvement in sacrifices, and possibly (though I think it unlikely) the ritualized 'divine marriage' between him and his realm, it was Hákon's personal interaction with various deities that seems to have been chiefly important in safeguarding Norse paganism and using it to ensure Norway's protection and prosperity. Both victory in war and fertility in the fields were the gift of the gods; both were mediated through the earl's religious function. Hákon's poets used mythological imagery to promote the earl's good name by making the link between his actions and their beneficial consequences explicit. Of course, because their goal was to praise and flatter Hákon, their work is probably an unreliable witness to what actually happened in late tenth-century Norway: they say what the earl wanted to hear and what he wanted people to hear about him. In short, they create a new kind of myth: a myth in which the earl of Hlaðir and his family are transformed – almost deified – into pagan culture-heroes, whose success could be contrasted with the failure of the Christian rulers who had tried to outlaw traditional forms of religious observance. It was a myth that the times required. In order to preserve Norwegians' traditional practices and modes of thought in the face of mounting Christian opposition, people needed to know that worshipping the pagan deities *worked*. Hákon, meanwhile, had to show that he was the right person to ensure successful sacrifices and to protect Norway's interests, both secular and sacred. So Hákon's poets embarked on a programme of myth-making with the earl at its centre. This mythological propaganda is so conspicuous in the works of these skalds that we might well think that Hákon had instigated or at least authorized it as a sort of 'state mythology'. For the duration of his reign, Norwegian identity and pagan identity were – according to this 'official' ideology – so closely bound together as to be almost indistinguishable. Religion provided a point around which to rally the earl's supporters against a common foe. The enemy – the foreigners, the outsiders, the traitors to traditional Norwegian values – could be lumped together as

Christians, but it was more important to use the myth of state paganism to draw Hákon's people together, and ensure that they continued to lend him their support. The new myths surrounding Jarl Hákon were not particularly anti-Christian, but they were entirely pro-pagan because, according to this propaganda, the earl was the very embodiment of paganism.

THE CREATION OF MYTHIC NARRATIVES

The new forms of religious discourse that surrounded Jarl Hákon are still not quite what we would usually call 'myths'. His poets used references to the Norse gods and other mythological figures as a technique for focusing attention on the earl's place within the pagan religious universe, but none of the compositions that we have examined so far tell us stories *about* the gods themselves. Hákon's skalds certainly knew fuller versions of the major myths that underlie their poetry, and presumably their audiences did too. Yet, as with the earlier skalds, it remains unclear in what form they knew these narratives. There is, however, some evidence that full-scale myths were being transmitted in poetic form during Hákon's reign and that some of these narrative poems have survived to the present day. Though it has not been conclusively proven, it seems likely that some of the great poems that make up the *Poetic Edda* achieved something like their final form in this period.

We have seen that Hákon's poets represented the earl as participating in some kind of sexual union with the land that he ruled. Hákon's perceived relationship with the mythological figure Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr may also be counted as part of this complex of ideas. Two of the eddic poems seem to relate particularly well to this strand of mythological imagery, and I shall examine them here despite the fact that their date and place of origin remain unknown. They express themes that were part of the mythological repertoire of Hákon's skalds; they fit well into this milieu, and illuminate aspects of *hieros gamos* as it was understood in the context of Norse paganism.

Hyndluljóð ('Hyndla's song') is not found in the canonical *Poetic Edda* collection, but has been termed 'eddic' on the basis of its metre and content. It is clearly a mythological poem, albeit a rather strange one. It survives in a single copy in the fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók* – the codex in which we find most of the surviving stories about Hákon and Þorgerðr

Hölgabrúðr. Many scholars have identified *Hyndluljóð* as a late, post-conversion poem, possibly dating from the twelfth century. It is probably two poems in one: the middle stanzas (29–44) make up a sequence that is separate from the narrative material of the poem's beginning and end. Snorri Sturluson knew this middle part as 'the shorter *Völuspá*' and he quotes from it in his *Edda*. It is usual, therefore, to treat *Hyndluljóð*'s two sections separately, as I shall do here, although there are some affinities between 'the shorter *Völuspá*' and the remainder of the poem.

The first notable thing about *Hyndluljóð* is that the two main protagonists are female. Although goddesses feature regularly in Norse myths, they are more frequently the objects of quests than the agents who undertake them. Here, the fertility goddess Freyja holds a dialogue with a giantess named Hyndla: their conversation focuses on the ancestry of one Óttarr, a mortal who seems to be Freyja's protégé. The second unusual and important feature of *Hyndluljóð* is that it is set in the world of the gods but reaches out into the human world, and even touches upon the actual worship that the gods receive from men. Freyja says that Óttarr deserves her support because:

> He's made an altar for me, faced with stone,
> now that stone has turned to glass;
> he's reddened the new altar with ox blood,
> Óttarr has always trusted in the Ásynjor [goddesses]. (Stanza 10)[24]

We do not know much about this Óttarr, but he – like Hákon – has clearly been active in promoting the sacrifices appropriate to Freyja's cult. His reward is that Freyja will obtain information about his lineage, which he needs to win a wager with a man named Angantýr: the stake is Óttarr's inheritance. So Freyja attempts to flatter and deceive Hyndla into sharing her knowledge about Óttarr's descent. Like other female figures in Norse mythology, this giantess's main attribute seems to be privileged insight into the past and a formidable memory. Such knowledge seems to have been regarded as a characteristically feminine trait, as we also shall see in the poems *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*.

Hyndla is suspicious of Freyja's motives. She calls Óttarr Freyja's 'lover' and calls Freyja herself 'deceitful' (Stanza 6). This deceit consists in Freyja's initial refusal to name Óttarr: she refers to him obliquely as her 'boar'. (The boar was supposed to be sacred to Freyja.) But Freyja also promises Hyndla that she will try to gain Thor's favour for her, even though he 'doesn't care

much for giant women'. She will 'sacrifice to Thor' in order to gain this concession from him (Stanza 4) – a curious reference to the gods performing rituals in their own honour, but one that is not unique. In the very first stanza of the poem, Freyja appeals to Hyndla as her 'sister', and she suggests that they should visit Odin in Valhalla, with an implied promise that he will give the two of them gifts (Stanzas 2–3). In the end, Hyndla relents, although we do not know which of Freyja's entreaties, deceptions, or attempted bribes has won her over. Hyndla then begins to recite Óttarr's whole genealogy, which takes up most of the poem. It turns out that Óttarr is descended from all the right people: his family tree includes the Skjöldungar – the legendary ancestors of the kings of Denmark – and the Völsungar, the legendary clan whose tragic history is related in poems and prose from both Scandinavia and Germany (including Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen*). Óttarr is also related to the historical Haraldr blátann ('blue-tooth') of Denmark. It is an impressive lineage indeed.

Although the references to Haraldr blátann and the Skjöldung dynasty might suggest a connection to Denmark, the genealogical impulse behind *Hyndluljóð* resembles that of the Norwegian poem *Háleygjatal*, in which Eyvindr skáldaspillir traced Jarl Hákon's descent from one of Scandinavia's principal families as an assertion of his authority and right to rule. Further, in a subtle and convincing analysis of the poem, John McKinnell has argued that the relationship between Freyja and Óttarr is analogous to Hákon's sacral 'marriage' to Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr.[25] *Flateyjarbók* tells us that Hákon had built shrines specifically for Þorgerðr's worship, and sacrificed in her honour. As we have seen above, part of his reward for these actions is to become Þorgerðr's lover or 'husband', symbolically at least. Óttarr earns the same favours from Freyja in return for the same sort of acts. McKinnell also notes that the poem's peculiar reference to the stone walls of Freyja's temple 'turning to glass' may also reflect the association between Þorgerðr's temples and precious objects. Finally, we may note that Þorgerðr also has a sister, Irpa, who sometimes also acts to protect Hákon; McKinnell interprets the conflict between Freyja and Hyndla as arising from the two 'sisters'' rivalry for Óttarr's favour. Hyndla's affection for the man she chides as 'foolish Óttarr' is what motivates her to provide the information with which he can win his wager with Angantýr and guarantee his patrimony. Her jealousy comes out again at the end of the poem, when she compares Freyja to Heiðrún, Valhalla's mead-producing goat, and she mentions the famously

promiscuous goddess's other lovers:

> You ran to Œði, always full of desire,
> many have thrust themselves up the front of your skirt;
> gallop away, noble lady, into the night,
> as Heiðrún runs in heat among the he-goats. (Stanza 47)

Œði may be a variant form of Óðr, who is named as Freyja's husband in *Snorra Edda*; but clearly he has not been the only one to enjoy her favours.

Hyndla's insults are below the belt in one sense, but they chime with Freyja's portrayal in other sources. In another eddic poem, *Lokasenna* – in which Loki gatecrashes a feast and systematically tells home truths about each of the Æsir – Freyja's promiscuity is the object of further scorn:

> Be silent Freyja, I know all about you;
> you aren't lacking in blame:
> of the Æsir and the elves, who are in here,
> each one has been your lover.[26]

Loki goes on to accuse Freyja of having slept with her own brother (Stanza 32), which seems beyond the pale even for a couple of fertility-deities.

Hyndluljóð ends with Óttarr receiving a draught of a 'beer of memory', which will allow him to fix all of Hyndla's information in his mind. But the giantess predicts that the beer – and by implication the knowledge – will prove to be bitter:

> Fire I see burning and the earth aflame,
> most when suffering will try to ransom their lives;
> put this beer into Óttarr's hand,
> mixed with a great deal of poison and ill fortune. (Stanza 49)

To which Freyja replies:

> Your curse will have no effect,
> bride of the giant, you intend to call down evil;
> he shall drink the precious liquid,
> I pray that Óttarr may thrive in all good things. (Stanza 50)

Hyndla's curse injects an ominous note into the proceedings. Even though Freyja 'prays' that Óttarr will continue to thrive, she cannot guarantee it. This sentiment of foreboding is not the sort of thing that we find in praise-poetry

about Hákon. Nor we would expect to: his skalds had the job of asserting that everything was all right in Norway under the earl's divinely guaranteed rule. But for Viking-Age kings in Scandinavia, success tended to be transitory, and history records that Jarl Hákon, pursued by his enemies, met his death in a pig-sty. He may have been surrounded by animals sacred to Freyja, but the gods could no longer protect him when his luck had run out. It seems that *Hyndluljóð* predicts a similarly unhappy outcome for Óttarr.

While it is important to emphasize that no positive evidence links the composition of *Hyndluljóð* to Hákon's circle, it ties in well with the myths of ancestry and divine patronage that his skalds created for him. This poem shows how a man could gain assistance and protection from a female mythological figure through proper cultic activities, and that the relationship between a goddess and her protégé could be configured as a sexual liaison. But the goddess's favours could only be won through sacrifice, as we saw in the story of Þorgerðr demanding the lives of Hákon's younger sons in exchange for her support in battle. Although the origins of *Hyndluljóð* are unknown, therefore, we can safely say that the ideology and imagery of the myth that it narrates are consonant with the wider myths about Hákon's relationship to divine figures that are expressed through tenth-century skaldic poetry and the later traditions about Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr. That *Hyndluljóð* has been transmitted in the same manuscript as several of the Þorgerðr-episodes may suggest that this material has been perceived as belonging together since at least the fourteenth century.

The second eddic poem that we might compare to the religious ideology of Hákon's circle is *För Skírnis* ('Skírnir's Journey', also sometimes called *Skírnismál*). *För Skírnis* is part of the *Poetic Edda*, where it occurs between the main wisdom poems (it follows *Grímnismál*) and *Hárbarðsljóð*, which describes an encounter between Thor and Odin. *För Skírnis* has in common with *Hyndluljóð* the fact that its protagonist is one of the Vanir: it is the only poetic version of a myth about the fertility god Freyr, Freyja's brother. Like *Hyndluljóð*, too, *För Skírnis* takes the form of a sequence of quoted speeches, although more than two characters get to speak. The use of direct speech can sometimes make it difficult to reconstruct a narrative, but the *Poetic Edda* manuscript contains several helpful prose insertions which make it easier to tell who is speaking to whom and what is happening in general. The original poem, presumably, would not have had these 'stage directions'.

In the manuscript, *För Skírnis* is introduced thus:

> Freyr, the son of Njörðr, had seated himself in Hlíðskjálf and looked into all the worlds. He looked into Giantland and saw there a beautiful girl, as she was walking from her father's hall to the storehouse. From that he caught great sickness of heart. Skírnir was the name of Freyr's page. Njörðr asked him to go and talk to Freyr.[27]

The girl's name is Gerðr, and Freyr is besotted with her, but he feels himself powerless to act upon his desires:

> In the courts of Gymir I saw walking
> a girl pleasing to me.
> Her arms shine and from there
> all the sea and air catch light.
>
> More pleasing to me is the girl than any girl to any man,
> young in bygone days;
> none of the gods and elves wishes that
> we should be together. (Stanzas 6–7)

För Skírnis tells us what happens when Skírnir travels to Giantland to ask for this maiden's hand on Freyr's behalf. It is a quest of sorts, but Skírnir does not encounter any significant obstacles before he runs up against Gerðr's implacable opposition to the idea of sleeping with Freyr.

First, Skírnir tempts Gerðr with gifts: he offers her eleven golden apples, and a remarkable ring, Draupnir – from which eight further rings drop every ninth night, and which according to Snorri was burned on the funeral pyre of the god Baldr. But Gerðr cannot be bought; she says that 'Freyr and I will not settle down together as long as our lives last' (Stanza 20). So Skírnir changes his tactics, and unleashes a remarkable string of threats and curses against the unfortunate giantess. He threatens to kill her, and to kill her father (Stanzas 23–25). In a very famous but obscure passage, he seems to curse her to banishment out of the world. She will sit on an 'eagle's mound', unable to eat, a spectacle for the whole world to gawp at (Stanzas 26–28). She will experience 'madness and howling, tearing affliction and unbearable desire' (Stanza 29). She will never enjoy a man's companionship, but 'miserably linger out [her] life with a three-headed giant' (Stanza 31). Then Skírnir seems to perform some sort of magic rite that threatens to bring about all these dire predictions:

> I went to the forest, to the living wood,
> to get a potent branch;
> a potent branch I got.

> Odin is angry with you, Thor is angry with you,
> Freyr will hate you;
> most wicked girl, you have brought down upon you
> the potent wrath of the gods.
>
> Hear, o ogres, hear o frost-giants,
> sons of Suttungr, the troops of the Æsir themselves,
> how I forbid, how I deny
> pleasure in men to the girl,
> benefit from men to the girl. (Stanzas 32–34)

Skírnir effectively forces Gerðr to enter into an unwanted sexual relationship by threatening to deny her any future satisfaction from or with men; and it appears that his magic is powerful enough to make this happen. After throwing in the detail that Gerðr's best hope of a drink in the future will be goat's piss, served in the world of the dead, he carves runes representing 'lewdness and frenzy and unbearable desire' (Stanza 35). At this point, when faced with a choice between giving in to Freyr's sexuality and giving up her own, as well as the prospect of a very miserable future, Gerðr relents and promises to lie with Freyr for one night.

Critics have seen in *För Skírnis* vestiges of an ancient *hieros gamos* myth. Indeed, it is the classic Norse example of a primary mythic narrative concerning the 'marriage' of a god to another mythological being. According to this type of reading, the poem is concerned with fertility: Gerðr here represents the earth – to which her name may be related etymologically – and Skírnir ('the shining one') the sun, which acts under the auspices of the fertility god Freyr to bring light and therefore life to the earth. (Some scholars have argued that Skírnir is actually Freyr himself, or else an aspect of the god's persona.) When Skírnir threatens to deprive Gerðr of her right to a fulfilling sex life and to banish her below the ground to a mythological realm of darkness, he is threatening to interrupt the earth's life-cycle. Though the character Gerðr does not desire the character Freyr, as a representation of the earth she cannot refuse Skírnir's offer when the alternative is barrenness. A further indication of the fertility myth underlying this story may be found in Skírnir's 'potent branch', with which he threatens to curse her as part of his magical rite: this object, also called a 'taming wand', can be viewed as a phallic symbol, the embodiment of the masculinity that Gerðr requires to be fulfilled as a woman and which the feminized earth requires to bring forth its fruits.

We have seen that Jarl Hákon's religious ideology, as it is expressed through contemporary court poetry, incorporated some notion of a symbolic sexual relationship between the ruler and the land. His reputation as a successful leader partly rested on the ability to ensure that Norway became prosperous and fertile with which his poets endowed him. The earl was also renowned as a womanizer who used his power to have his way with other men's wives, although it is hazardous to make a connection between his religious function and his voracious sexuality. There is no evidence to link *För Skírnis* to Hákon's court – in its present form it is undoubtedly an Icelandic poem – but it seems to embody elements of the hyper-masculine religious persona that some of the other sources create for Hákon. It does not prove the existence of an established tradition of 'sacral kingship' in tenth-century Norway, but if the version of paganism practised in Hákon's time did have a place for 'divine marriage' myths then *För Skírnis* might be a good example of the sort of mythic narrative that was told in connection with this wider idea. To my mind, *För Skírnis* is a notably unpleasant, misogynistic story. It does not take much imagination to equate the fertility god who uses the power of ritual magic to force a giantess into having sex with him with the earl who abused his own position of power to fulfil his own sexual predilections. Hákon's poets made him the gods' descendent, favourite and agent here on earth; they tried to represent him as a god among men. If he came to believe his own propaganda, as leaders are wont to do, he might even have begun to behave as if he *were* one of the *Æ*sir; and the Norse gods rarely set a good example. A myth like *För Skírnis* reminds us that the *hieros gamos* between the ruler and his land is not always a tender love affair: it can also be rape.

ÞÓRSDRÁPA AND THE PROBLEMS WITH SKALDIC MYTHOLOGY

Hyndluljóð and *För Skírnis* provide myths which fit into the general religious ideology that Hákon's skalds promoted through their verse. But these similarities are not sufficient to prove that eddic poetry was in circulation in contemporary Norway, still less that there was a stable and coherent body of mythological poems like what we know now as the *Poetic Edda*. The only mythological narrative poem which we can place directly in Hákon's circle is an unmistakeably skaldic composition. *Þórsdrápa* ('Poem about Thor'),

which is attributed to the Icelandic poet Eilífr Goðrúnarson, is an almost unique attempt to tell a single, discrete story about a god's adventures in the tortuous *dróttkvætt* metre. It is notoriously one of the most difficult poems in all of Old Norse literature; and it perhaps illustrates why most poets chose simpler forms for mythological narrative and restricted the mythological content of *dróttkvætt* stanzas to static images drawn from myths available in other media.

Eilífr is named as one of Hákon's poets in *Skáldatal*, but we know almost nothing else about him. His verse is only found in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, and aside from *Þórsdrápa* hardly any poetry attributed to him survives. A free-standing stanza that Snorri names as one of Eilífr's – and which some scholars believe should be included as part of *Þórsdrápa* – could possibly be a fragment of a praise-poem about Jarl Hákon, although it is difficult to be certain:

> You must decide about kindly gifts,
> since Son's seed [the mead of poetry]
> grows on our word-meadow [tongue]
> about High kin.[28]

In this stanza, the allusion to 'High kin' (*mæran kon* in the Old Norse) could be a play on Hákon's name: *mærr* means 'famous' and could conceivably be viewed as a synonym for *hár* ('high'), which together with *-kon* makes up the earl's name. This verse with its talk of gifts in repayment for poetry certainly sounds like it might come from a praise-poem, but another interpretation makes Thor the subject and addressee of this verse. In Eilífr's work, nothing is straightforward.

The only other information about Eilífr himself that we may extract from his surviving poetry is that he had some knowledge of Christianity. Snorri includes another verse by Eilífr in the section of *Skáldskaparmál* that describes the ways in which poets may use traditional types of kennings to talk about Christ:

> Early poets have referred to poets in terms of the well of Urðr and Rome, as for instance Eilífr Goðrúnarson:
>
> > Thus has the powerful king of Rome [Christ]
> > increased his realm with lands
> > of heath-land divinities [giants].

He is said to have his throne south at Urðr's well.[29]

This intriguing stanza captures some of the religious atmosphere of late tenth-century Norway. It demonstrates the incursions Christianity was making into a realm described as the 'land of heath-land divinities' – the mythological giants. Once again, Norway is given a pagan identity. But now we get the feeling that the poet is not altogether certain that Christianity's arrival is a bad thing: the Norwegians are no longer identified with the pagan gods, but with the giants who are always the main enemies of the Æsir in the myths. Christ is powerful and successful, whereas in other poems from Hákon's circle it is the pagan gods, operating through Hákon, who rule in Norway. Perhaps Eilífr himself had converted to Christianity; or perhaps he simply saw the writing on the wall towards the end of Hákon's reign or soon after his death. He observed the spread of Christianity from a pagan perspective, but one which saw the downfall of paganism as inevitable. As a poet, too, he retains a pagan worldview and frame of reference. By placing Christ's dwelling-place at 'Urðr's well' he actually locates the new god physically within the pagan cosmos. Urðr is the name of one of the three Norns – the female figures that were believed to control the destiny of all living things in Norse mythology. According to *Snorra Edda*, Urðr and her sisters live by a well at the very centre of the universe, underneath the world-tree Yggdrasill. Perhaps Eilífr had heard that Christ lived at the centre of the world – in medieval Christian thought, Jerusalem was the mid-point of the earth, and Christ is sometimes called 'king of Jerusalem' in skaldic poetry – and transferred Christ's home from the central place of one cosmology to that of the other. At any rate, this verse shows that the mythologies of the two competing religions overlapped in Eilífr's imagination.

The co-existence of Christian and pagan ideas in Eilífr's stanza provides further evidence that Norway was in a state of religious syncretism during Hákon's reign. People could identify themselves as either Christian or pagan, but the two were not in practice mutually exclusive, and people could choose a religious identity that incorporated elements of both. Adopting Christianity did not mean that a former pagan's worldview was instantly and automatically transformed, so that all pagan concepts were driven out of it – much though the Church would have liked to achieve that aim. And people who preferred to stick with their traditional pagan identity were still increasingly exposed to Christian beliefs and practices as the new religion

took a wider hold on society. These intersections between Christianity and paganism provide an important context for Eilífr's major poem, *Þórsdrápa*.

Þórsdrápa tells the story of Thor's journey to the home of the giant Geirrøðr. This narrative is well known from Snorri's version, which he based upon Eilífr's poem and which irons out many of the difficulties of the verse in a straightforward prose account. If we ignore this later retelling of the tale and restrict ourselves to *Þórsdrápa*, however, we soon run up against a major problem: the *dróttkvætt* metre and Eilífr's extensive use of complex kennings makes it very hard indeed to follow the story.

Thor is the hero of the story, but Loki also plays a very important role. We have already seen that Loki was understood to have an important part in certain myths – the story of Iðunn's abduction, for example – but that he had no discernable place in pagan religion. He acts as an instigator, setting events in motion and all too often causing trouble for the Æsir; many myths focus on the trouble that he causes and the gods' attempts to avert the disaster that his actions threaten to precipitate. Often, only Loki himself can avert the catastrophe that looms over the gods. In *Þórsdrápa*, Loki initiates the action by persuading Thor to set off towards Geirrøðr's court in Giantland. At the start of the poem, Loki is presented as untrustworthy and a liar. In Norse society, keeping one's word was sacrosanct, a central pillar of traditional codes of honour. But Loki has no time for such conventions:

> The sea-thread's [Miðgarðsormr's] father [Loki]
> set out to urge the feller of flight-ledge-gods' [giants; their feller is Thor] life-net from home.
> Loptr [a name for Loki] was proficient at lying.
> The not very trustworthy trier [Loki] of the war-thunder-gautr [Thor]
> said that green paths led to Geirrøðr's wall-steed [house].[30]

Thor is not renowned for his intelligence, and the cunning Loki has little trouble in persuading him that it would be a good idea to search out the giant's home. The only motivation that Eilífr provides for them is that the gods are 'eager to crush the kin of Þorn [the giants]' (Stanza 2). But by implication – and on the basis of what we know about him already – we can be sure that Loki realizes that Thor's trip will not be so straightforward.

The concentration of kennings in *Þórsdrápa* means that the action progresses slowly. In the fourth stanza, Thor reaches the 'heaven-targe-dwelling's blood of the women of Friðr's first defiler'. Not only is this the

most convoluted kenning for ‘a river’ one could imagine, it also alludes to an event in the myth that has not yet happened in the poem. ‘Friðr’ appears to be a name here, although the word itself means ‘peace’; but we do not know of any mythological figure that served as a personification of peace or went by that name. So we cannot be sure who ‘Friðr’s first defiler’ is. The opening part of the kenning is more comprehensible: a targe is a shield, so the shield (a round thing) of heaven is the sun. The sun’s dwelling is the sky, and the blood of the sky – according to the logic of kenning formation – is water. To ‘solve’ the whole kenning, we therefore need to link ‘water’ with the ‘women of Friðr’s defiler’.

If we continue to read *Þórsdrápa* we soon find an answer to the conundrum. Thor attempts to ford the river, which is beset by many obstacles: it is swollen and ‘rolling with hail’; poison spews into it; somebody has stuck spears into the bottom, facing against the current. A storm rages over the scene, which Eilífr describes vividly, all the while maintaining the complexity and mythological load of his kennings:

> The fine oath-bound Gautr’s residence-Vikings [Thor and his companion, later identified as Þjalfi],
> battle-wise, waded hard while the sward-flowing fen [river] flowed.
> The earth-drift-wave [river] raged mightily, blown by stormy weather,
> at the ridge-land [mountain] room [cave]-dwellers’ [giants’] trouble-worsener [Thor]. (Stanza 8)

In the next stanza, we finally find out why the river is so high and turbid: ‘Mischief-Mímir’s widows made the harsh current violent against the pole’. (Stanza 9) These ‘widows’ must be giantesses, and they somehow have caused the harsh current against which Thor struggles, bracing himself against his pole. If we turn to *Snorra Edda* for enlightenment, we find that Geirrøðr has two daughters, Gjálp and Greip, who – according to Snorri – stand astride the river and add to its flow with their urine or menstrual blood. Therefore, ‘Mischief-Mímir’s widows’ can be identified as Gjálp and Greip, who are the same as the ‘women of Friðr’s first defiler’ in Stanza 4. In order to understand that kenning, we need to know already that the giantesses are the source from which the river’s waters flow. In other words, even though Eilífr’s poem is the earliest – and indeed only – poetic narrative about Thor’s adventure, it certainly was not the original version of the myth. An audience who did not already know the story would have no hope of interpreting Eilífr’s river-kenning before they had heard about Greip and Gjálp, figures

who themselves are only referred to in very obscure terms in this poem. *Þórsdrápa* must be a reworking of a pre-existing story, a myth re-expressed through the medium of skaldic poetry for a mythologically educated audience. We cannot experience the story as Eilífr himself first heard it, but we can see from the strangeness and difficulty of his poem the fruit of his own artistry and originality.

Thor manages to cross the river, and proceeds to Geirrøðr's courts. There he takes part in a climactic battle scene that is no easier to follow than what has preceded it in the poem. We find out that Thor is 'brought into dire straits on the hat of the wife of giants' and that in revenge he breaks the giantesses' backs (Stanzas 14–15). Eventually, Geirrøðr himself joins the fray. He hurls a lump of molten rock at Thor, who catches it and returns it with interest, striking Geirrøðr in the head before finishing him off with his hammer: myths concerning Thor always tend to end with Mjöllnir embedded in the skull of one unfortunate giant or another. Eilífr's references to these events are so obscure as to once again suggest that his audience would have had to have prior knowledge of the myth.

As it is preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, *Þórsdrápa* concludes with a eulogy in praise of Thor's strength and prowess:

> Worshipped by multitudes, he who overcomes
> the calves of the secret cave of elf-world's shine [the giants]
> wielded the forest's handy fragment [pole] mightily.
> Nor could the Rugians [or 'Rogolanders'] of falcon-lair-Lister [giants] stand up
> to the trusty stone-Ella-people's [giants'] life-curtailer [Thor]. (Stanza 19)

Thor has defeated the giants; he is 'worshipped by multitudes'. At first glance, this seems to be the straightforward message of Eilífr's poem: Thor is doing what he does best – and what the other Æsir hardly ever do. By killing giants, he is simply conforming to type. It seems like a conceptual stretch to suggest that *Þórsdrápa* is in fact a subtle and innovatory poem that bears upon the religious turmoil in Norway in Jarl Hákon's day. But that is just what it may be. Roberta Frank – who has been one of the most sympathetic and acute of interpreters of skaldic verse in recent years – has shown that the opaque text of *Þórsdrápa* conceals layers of meaning that suggest a rather more sophisticated message than simply 'Thor kills giants'.[31]

According to Frank, we must look more deeply into Eilífr's kennings if we

are to understand the subtext of his poem. To begin with the ending, we might note that the giants in the final stanza are located in the real world, rather than in the world of myth. They are called *Rygir*, a name which probably refers to inhabitants of Rogaland in southern Norway. So Thor's enemies are given a place in Norwegian geography, and that place is diametrically opposed to Jarl Hákon's power-base in the far northern Trøndelag. Elsewhere in the poem, Eilífr uses the names of actual Norwegian rivers in his kennings for the mythological river that Thor crosses (Feðja in Stanza 7; Mörn in Stanza 8). The god traverses a landscape that is as much of this world as it is of the mythological universe.

The giants are also associated with Ella. Ella is the Norse equivalent of Ælle, the name of a semi-legendary king of Northumbria who was well known in Scandinavia. In skaldic poetry, 'Ella's descendent' is used as a kenning for 'king of England', for example. By using this kenning, therefore, Eilífr makes the giants doubly foreign to Hákon's homeland; they come from a different region, and they belong to a different race or nation. Imagining the giants as in some sense 'English' may also introduce a religious dimension to this comparison. Norsemen of Eilífr's day were fully aware of England as a Christian country; Hákon's Christian predecessors had been baptized in England or under English influence; and many of the missionaries who still traversed Norway bringing the good news to the pagans were of English origin. So here the giants can stand for Hákon's opponents in the battle for the soul of Norway; we might also identify something of Hákon in the poem's portrayal of Thor. Thor is successful; he defeats his enemies; he is worshipped by many. All these things could be said about Hákon as he is portrayed elsewhere in the skaldic corpus. We might also note that *Þórsdrápa* is another sexualized poem. Most of its action concerns the god's attempt to overcome the giant's daughters, who seem to use their monstrous femininity as a weapon against him. But Thor survives their attacks by using his 'pole' – first to stand firm against the heavy flow of the river, and then by bracing himself with it against the roof of Geirrøðr's hall and breaking the giantesses' backs. It does not take a great leap of imagination to identify Thor's weapon with a phallus, nor to see a further resemblance between this ultra-masculine mythological hero using sex as a tool of oppression and Hákon's own attitude towards women.

Þórsdrápa is therefore a poem that pits 'them' against 'us'. 'They', the giants, may be equated with foreignness, Christianity and femininity on top

of their conventional mythological associations as the enemies of the Æsir; they are also the losers. 'We', as represented by Thor, are associated with the binary opposites of the giants' characteristics: we are native, pagan, masculine and we win. These dichotomies, which serve to portray the representatives of paganism in a positive way by contrasting them with the failures of the representative of the alternative system, are fully in accordance with the strategies of Hákon's other court poets, as described above. Interpreting *Þórsdrápa* in this way might also lead us to a different reading of Eilífr's 'King of Rome' stanza. The 'land of heath-divinities [giants]' may refer especially to those parts of Norway that are not under the direct control of Jarl Hákon; in other words, only the lands of his enemies within Norway have become 'tainted' with the influence of Christianity.

Eilífr knew about Christianity, and we can read his poetry partly as a reaction against the new religion, although it is never explicitly mentioned in *Þórsdrápa*. But the final aspect of Frank's interpretation suggests that Eilífr's treatment of his mythic subject is influenced positively by Christian traditions, even as it positions itself in opposition to Christian culture in general. Of all the Norse gods, Thor was the one whose cult intersected most often with Christianity. We recall how the hammer and the cross were seen as analogous religious symbols, imbued with similar sorts of power, and that it is possible that the increased popularity of Thor's hammer icon in the tenth century was itself a reaction to the powerful new Christian symbol that began to be seen around Scandinavia in increasing numbers. Thor's characteristics – strength, integrity, heroism, protection – are more Christ-like than any of the possible alternatives in the Norse pantheon. Christ was often represented as a bold warrior in early Germanic Christian culture; his portrayal there – a rather more muscular one than the one with which we are nowadays familiar – was part of an attempt to make him an attractive and praiseworthy figure according to traditional Germanic cultural values. Frank argues that, in this poem, Thor becomes rather more Christ-like than normal, in an inversion of this process of 'Germanicization'.

It must be admitted that Thor does not come to resemble Christ *very* much over the course of his adventure in Giantland. However, there are certain signs that may indicate the two traditions' convergence. First, Frank suggests that Eilífr's story of a divine hero travelling into darkness – actual or symbolic – and defeating his enemies through the power of his principal religious emblem may have been influenced by the popular story of Christ's

Harrowing of Hell. In many versions of this apocryphal story, Christ's journey into hell to rescue the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament from Satan's grip is described like a military expedition, in which Christ is a victorious hero. It is possible, too, that Loki's portrayal at the start of *Þórsdrápa* may have been influenced by Christian myths of Satan as a great deceiver. In the earlier poetry that we have examined, Loki has not been a particularly prominent character; in the later myths that we will come to next, his role is of paramount importance, and it is his deceitfulness, envy and malice – all characteristics strongly associated with Satan – that bring about the downfall of the gods, effectively ending the pagan universe. In the first three stanzas of *Þórsdrápa*, Loki is never identified without reference to his untrustworthiness or mendacity. He is on his way to being demonized. Thor, on the other hand, is referred to by positive epithets throughout the poem. (He is also represented as a serious rather than comic character, and the stupidity for which he often seems to be fondly mocked in the myths is not found here.) Most often he is identified as the 'enemy of giants'; Eilífr possessed a staggering range of alternative kennings based on this idea. At one point, however, Thor is also called the 'helper of men' (Stanza 9). While this kenning could refer to Thor's place in pagan religion – he could be called upon to help people in specific situations – this is not one of his usual epithets in skaldic poetry. Indeed, the precise phrase – *sinni ýta* in the original language – is found nowhere else in the corpus. This kenning sounds more Christ-like than Thor-like: the Old Norse word for 'saviour', frequently applied to Christ, is *hjálpari*, 'helper'. In a later Christian prose text, the Icelandic *Barlaams saga*, when God bestows his assistance upon people the word *sinni* is used to describe his favour: 'doubtless God helps that man' (*ifanarlaust er Guð í sinni með þeim manni*).[32] Referring to Thor in this way may be a further subtle indication that Eilífr conceived of Thor and Christ as analogous figures who performed similar feats and fulfilled similar functions in their respective religions. It is another of the 'uncanny resemblances' between the two rival deities that Frank discerns in syncretistic literature from the conversion period.[33]

The message of Eilífr's *Þórsdrápa* may be pro-pagan, but that is not to say that it necessarily rejects Christ. Adherents to a polytheistic paganism need not have automatically doubted the godhood or the effective power of Christ, whose influence they increasingly saw at work around them. Christ could be another god among many, and aspects of his cult or myths could be accepted,

adopted, or adapted into the conceptual framework of paganism without doing major damage to the pagan worldview. So Eilífr appears to have created a new myth about Thor that combines a traditional, presumably well-known mythic narrative with aspects of Christian mythology that he finds attractive. The traces of this syncretism are faint, but as Frank shows, they are there if we look for them. And it seems appropriate that a poem from near the end of Hákon's reign, when the storm-clouds of religious tension were gathering as the earl lost his grip on power, should display this type of syncretistic attitude. For a while the hammer and the cross both held sway in Norway, despite Hákon's best efforts to promote pagan rites over Christian ones. Alongside the other poetry produced by the earl's skalds, *Þórsdrápa* gives us a fascinating – if frustrating – insight into how this type of religious and cultural change could affect the production of new mythic narratives.

THE END OF THE PAGAN WORLD?

There can be no doubt that the religious situation in Norway was in a state of flux throughout the second half of the tenth century. People were well aware that they lived in a period of epochal change, and the history and myths of the time seem to reflect this atmosphere of instability. Jarl Hákon's mythic propaganda was made necessary by Christianity's perceived threat to his religion and to his rule; a poem like *Þórsdrápa* reveals that the new religion had become so insidious that it was even influencing 'pagan' myths in subtle but decisive ways. From the perspective of medieval historians working in an established tradition of Christian universal history, Christ's eventual triumph over Thor and the other old gods was pre-ordained. Their writings about the progress of Norway from paganism to conversion are teleological, working backwards from what they saw to be the only possible conclusion to the story of Scandinavia's religious progress. We shall look at some of these Christian attitudes towards paganism in the following chapters, but for now we turn our attention to what pagans thought about the prospect of their religion entering its twilight phase. Was it the end of the world as the pagans knew it?

We saw in the eddic praise-poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* that the concept of Ragnarök ('the doom of the gods') had been present in Norwegian mythology for much of the tenth century. Earlier poetry, too, contains

occasional references to elements from the Ragnarök myth. From these sources we learned that a final battle will take place between the gods and the monstrous forces of destruction – in particular Loki's troublesome offspring Fenrir and Miðgarðsormr. The heroic dead, the *einherjar*, will fight on the gods' side and it is for this reason that Valhalla exists, in order to act as a divine training-camp in anticipation of the great fight. Both *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* state that it is as yet unknown when the final countdown to Ragnarök will begin. There is no evidence that either poet imagined the end of the world was imminent; neither of them provides a complete narrative that answers all the big questions: when will the world end? How? Why? What should we do about it? And what happens afterward? But answers to most of these questions are provided by the greatest of all the Old Norse mythological poems, *Völuspá*.

The premise behind *Völuspá* is that not even the gods know everything about their own fate and the fate of the world. This magnificent poem, which is the opening text in the *Poetic Edda* collection, is also preserved in a separate version in another Icelandic manuscript, *Hauksbók*, from about 1300. It takes the form of a monologue spoken by a *völva* – a pagan prophetess. Like the giantess in *Hyndluljóð*, the unnamed speaker in *Völuspá* has knowledge about the past that is inaccessible to the Æsir; like Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, she can predict the future and we need not doubt that her predictions will come true. Even Odin, whose quest for such knowledge dominates his portrayal in myths from all periods, has much to learn from her. *Völuspá* makes it clear that the *völva*'s testament is directed at the chief of the gods:

> I ask for a hearing from all the sacred people,
> greater and lesser, the kindred of Heimdallr;
> Father of the slain, you wished that I should tell the ancient stories of men,
> as far back as I remember. (Stanza 1)[34]

Like Hyndla, the speaker is the kindred of giants; she has been alive from almost the very beginning of the world (Stanza 2), and she now seems to exist outside conventional time and space; at least she is never given a definite place within the cosmos. With her temporal and spatial indefiniteness and the innate special knowledge with which these female figures were endowed, she can provide Odin with an external perspective on the history of the universe, including the part of it that has not happened yet. *Völuspá* gives

us the first complete history of the Norse mythological world. It contains many myths, or references to myths, which it brings together to create a coherent master-narrative. It is significant that the poem does not concentrate on the experiences of a single god or group of gods; the *völva*'s perspective on events is panoramic. This illusion of objectivity explains why Odin must accept and believe her account – his thirst for knowledge has not been satisfied by hanging himself on the world-tree, obtaining the mead of poetry or even by exchanging his eye for a drink from Mímir's well. Each of these trials gave him different aspects of his celebrated wisdom, but Odin now wants facts.

Völuspá begins with a fairly brief account of the creation of the universe. This theme is not at all well represented in skaldic poetry, so it is difficult to assess whether *Völuspá*'s version is typical or innovative, though it coincides in some details with the account of the origins of the world that we find in two other eddic knowledge-poems, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*. In *Völuspá*, the creation of the universe is described obliquely by referring to 'Ymir making his settlement'. Presumably the poem's audience would have known that Ymir was the primordial giant out of whose body everything in the world was created; this part of the story is fleshed out in *Vafþrúðnismál*. The *völva* reminds Odin that the Æsir were responsible for determining the final form of the cosmos; they decided upon the position of the heavenly bodies, and divided time into its conventional units of reckoning (Stanzas 4–6). The Æsir are represented as all-powerful at this point in the narrative: they are called *regin* ('powers') and *ginnheilog goð* ('most holy gods'); they sit on *rökstólar* ('thrones of judgement'). And they seem to perform some sort of religious ceremony, presumably in their own honour:

> The Æsir met at Iðavellir;
> they built altars and high-timbered temples;
> they established hearths, created wealth,
> shaped tongs and made tools. (Stanza 7)

The 'altars' and 'temples' are described in the language of pagan religion: both *hörg* and *hof* are well represented in the historical record as words for sites of pagan worship, although their precise meaning is unclear. It seems curious that the gods should need to create temples – at this point in the narrative, they appear to be the universe's only inhabitants – but the poem seems to suggest that they are responsible for all aspects of human culture:

religion is just one thing that they introduce into the world, alongside the use of tools and the creation of precious objects.

For all too brief a time, the *Æsir* enjoy the world that they have created:

> They played at *tafl* in the meadow, they were merry,
> there was no lack of gold for them,
> until three giant girls came,
> mighty and powerful, out of Giantland. (Stanza 8)

Tafl is a Scandinavian board game, akin to chess or draughts; here, though, it symbolizes the 'golden age' of the gods, the height of their achievement and the last time that they ever really enjoy any peace of mind. From this point onwards, crisis after crisis besets the *Æsir*. Each time they gather together in an assembly and try to agree how to solve the problem – in the case of the three mysterious giant maidens, they apparently decide that it would be a good idea to create the dwarfs, although nobody is sure exactly why. But from here on, ever-present threats of disaster loom over the gods.

Odin, of course, must know all this; he was present at the creation of mankind (Stanzas 17–20) and at the 'first war in the world' (Stanzas 21–24). This is the conflict between the *Æsir* and the Vanir, faint traces of which are discernible in other myths, although no surviving poem tells us the full story. The *völva* does not hesitate to remind Odin that one of the gods had caused this conflict; 'mixing the air with malice' and giving Freyja to the giants after all the solemn oaths between the two parties had been broken (Stanzas 25–26). At this point scholars generally accept that the poem alludes to the famous story, told in full in *Snorra Edda*, of how the *Æsir* engaged – at Loki's suggestion – a giant to build a protective wall around Ásgarðr with the promise of Freyja, the sun and the moon as his payment if he completed the job on time. Loki, of course, had to get the gods out of that mess when it became clear that the giant-builder would earn his pay, but *Völuspá* does not mention the famous twist in the tale (and tail) by which Loki tricks the giant into losing the wager.

This episode concludes *Völuspá*'s treatment of ancient history. At this point the *völva* taunts Odin with the inadequacy of his knowledge compared to her own:

> Alone she sat outside, when the old man came,
> the terrible one of the *Æsir*, and looked her in the eye:
> 'Why do you question me? Why do you test me?

> I know everything, Odin, where you hid your eye
> in Mímir's famous well.
> Each morning Mímir drinks mead
> from the Father of the Slain's wager
> – do you know yet, or what?' (Stanza 28)

The challenge 'do you know yet, or what' becomes the poem's first repeated refrain. The *völva* questions both the limits of Odin's knowledge and his desire to find out the truth; things are already going badly for the Æsir in her narrative, and they are unlikely to get better. Does Odin really want to know what will happen to them, and to him? His previous attempts to gain knowledge are represented as useless – Mímir has his eye, and mockingly drinks out of it each morning, and what good has this exchange done Odin? But the god cannot resist hearing more; he gives the prophetess valuable gifts (Stanza 29) and she continues her story.

From the distant past the *völva* turns to more recent history. The whole poem turns on Stanza 31, which effectively sets in motion the chain of events that will lead to Ragnarök:

> I saw for Baldr, the bloody god [or sacrifice],
> Odin's child, his fate concealed;
> there stood grown – above the plain,
> slender and very beautiful – the mistletoe. (Stanza 31)

This chilling, ominous verse is most effective if the reader is already familiar with what happens to Odin's son, Baldr. The fullest version of the myth, which appears to be an expansion of *Völuspá*'s version, is found in *Snorra Edda*, where we learn how the gods, worried for the safety of their beloved, beautiful Baldr, had tried to persuade all of creation to promise not to harm him. But they neglected to extract this promise from the mistletoe, an innocuous looking plant. Seemingly invulnerable, Baldr had agreed to let the gods attack him with whatever weapons lay to hand when Loki tricked Baldr's blind brother Höðr into shooting a dart of mistletoe at him, so as not to miss out on the fun. Baldr is killed at once. This manslaughter is the central event in the history of the Norse gods, but it is doubtful how common or important a narrative it was in the pagan period. Baldr seldom appears in skaldic poetry, and court poets make few references to this story in general. It was more popular in eddic poetry; as well as *Völuspá*, there is a poem called *Baldrs draumar*, in which Odin once again visits a *völva* to find out what will

happen to Baldr, and a version of the myth is also preserved in the 'shorter *Völuspá*' that is now embedded within *Hyndluljóð*. But we do not know when or where these poems were composed; it is difficult to tell, therefore, how old the myth of Baldr's death is, or what importance it had in pagan culture, particularly of the earlier period.

Baldr's death and its aftermath – the vengeance that the gods take on Höðr, and Loki's punishment by being bound with his son's intestines (Stanzas 31–35) – seems to have taken place quite recently, relative to the time when Odin has his consultation with the *völva*. From this point onwards, the narrative shifts between past and present tense, as the *völva* describes a series of ominous visions: there is no obvious connection between them, but they are all bleak and foreboding. She sees a hall whose roof is made from the spines of serpents and from which poison drips; a vision of something like the Christian hell, in which perjurers and murderers and seducers of women are made to wade hostile rivers, while a wolf and a beast named Níðhöggr ('corpse-biter') gnaw on dead bodies; a giantess raises a brood of monstrous wolves (Stanzas 38–40). These interruptions to the narrative flow of the poem only delay the inevitable; the tension is released in the next stanza as:

> The corpses of doomed men fall,
> the gods' dwellings are reddened with crimson blood;
> sunshine becomes black the next summer,
> the weather all treacherous
> – do you know yet, or what? (Stanza 41)

Now, the *völva*'s narrative gathers pace. Two cocks crow, awakening the inhabitants of Valhalla and Hel alike; the dog Garmr howls and the 'ravenous one' runs free (Stanzas 43–44). At this point the poem switches between present and future tense, lending a great air of immediacy to her description; we feel that these events are close at hand: she explicitly says that she can see the *röc ragna*, the 'doom [or fate] of the powers', who are ironically also called *sigtývar* ('gods of victory') (Stanza 44). Ragnarök is a terminal breakdown of all order; everything that had bound the universe together begins to shudder and crack (Stanza 47) and all the world-destroying monsters that had been restrained hitherto (Loki and his brood, as well as the giants and Hel's inhabitants) run free. Things unravel, and not just in the world of the gods. The end of the world will also be prefigured by a terrible period of strife and conflict among men:

> Brother will fight brother and become his killer,
> siblings will violate kinship-bonds.
> There is hardship in the world, much adultery:
> an axe-age, a sword-age – shields are cloven;
> a wind-age, a wolf-age – before the world collapses.
> No man will spare another. (Stanza 45)

Society breaks down in cruelty and violence. People do not observe the proprieties. The gods may have brought all this to pass through their own deceitfulness, their own refusal to abide by oaths, but this behaviour seems now to have affected all creation.

As the forces of destruction, led by Loki, set out towards the lands of the gods, the *Æsir* respond in typical fashion – they have a meeting (Stanza 48). Equally typically, their meeting achieves nothing. There is nothing left but to fight. So the gods match up with their pre-ordained opponents: Odin tackles the wolf Fenrir; Thor fights the serpent. Fenrir kills Odin, but Odin's son Víðarr avenges him at once; Thor and Miðgarðsormr die at the same time, locked in a terrible death-grip. The actual battle is over in an instant, taking up only four stanzas (Stanzas 53–56). And with the death of the gods comes the end of the world, along with a striking vision of environmental catastrophe:

> The sun turns black, the earth sinks into the sea,
> the bright stars vanish from the sky;
> steam rises up in the conflagration,
> a high flame plays against heaven itself. (Stanza 57)

In this Norse vision of Armageddon, the world does end with a bang.

A brief summary of *Völuspá* cannot do justice to its compelling narrative, intriguing structure and mastery of tone, style and pace. But we have seen enough of the poem to gain some insight into its main concerns. It is a text that values loyalty and steadfastness and condemns deceit and bad faith; the poet does not find much of the former in the history of the universe, but plenty of the latter. The gods are portrayed as weak and ineffectual as well as untrustworthy, though their doomed fight against the monsters and giants is heroic. Above all, things happen as they must according to an underlying fate or providence, to which even the gods are subject, as signified by the use of the term Ragnarök itself. We know – as the *völva* knows – that Odin will not be able to put any of the information she gives him to good use. The *Æsir* are

impotent before their fate, and all Odin's great quest for knowledge is revealed as a fool's errand.

Völuspá is the key primary text of Norse mythology, the only poetic source to narrate the whole history of the cosmos. Yet it presents the pagan gods as flawed and ignoble, and the world as doomed to sink into the sea after mankind has been thrown into vicious internecine conflict. Odin can't help us, since he can't help himself. Thor's strength is just about a match for the world-serpent, but it is no use against fate. Perhaps if the gods had behaved better earlier on, perhaps if they had protected Baldr against Loki's machinations, or kept their promises in the wake of the war with the Vanir, the world might have been saved. Perhaps if people had kept faith with one another, respected the bonds that hold society together, adhered to a stricter moral code, they could have helped to forestall Ragnarök – for a while, at least. But according to the internal logic of fate in *Völuspá*, everything has happened as it must because everything *will* happen as it must. It leaves the pagan gods powerless to control a universe of their own making. Its fatalism suggests that the whole system of paganism is doomed to failure; we might go further and suggest that it is not worth saving. The *völva*'s description of Ragnarök gives us little cause for hope.

Except, of course, that Ragnarök is not the end. Like most apocalyptic myths, the death of the old world is necessary so that a new one can be born. The *völva*'s vision encompasses a future beyond the apocalypse:

> She sees, coming up a second time,
> an earth out of the ocean, eternally green;
> waterfalls tumble down, an eagle flies overhead,
> hunting fish on the mountain. (Stanza 59)

This calm, pacific vision of natural beauty and fecundity contrasts sharply with the scorched earth and darkened skies of Ragnarök. And the earth is not the only thing reborn: we discover that some of the Æsir will return, still possessed of their memories of the old world, which they discuss in the same field where the gods had formerly met in council. They even discover the golden playing-pieces that they had used in their games back in the age of their – and the world's – innocence (Stanzas 60–61). The *völva* mentions particularly that Baldr and Höðr, the two gods who had been killed undeservedly and to whom no blame could attach, will return to live in happiness in a world where the fields will bring forth crops unsown (Stanza

62).

So *Völuspá* is a poem about the breakdown of society, the death of an old order that looks forwards to a new and better version of the world, one in which the culpable *Æ*sir will have no place, but in which the innocent will prosper. It is hard to avoid the interpretation that the poem must originate in a period of similar conflict, but also anticipated that a new and better situation might be possible – in short, that it was composed in a pagan society, but one in crisis, and in which people were aware of an alternative. That alternative was Christianity. *Völuspá* does not mention Christ by name, but there are two stanzas near to the end of the poem that seem to require a Christian interpretation. First, we learn of a shining hall in which worthy people will dwell in happiness, and which has reminded some of the Christian heaven:

> A hall she sees standing, fairer than the sun,
> thatched with gold, at Gimlé;
> there the noble lords will live
> and spend their days in pleasure. (Stanza 64)

It should be noted, however, that on the basis of this description the hall at Gimlé might be a revitalized version of Valhalla, which is described in *Snorra Edda* as thatched with gold. The following stanza is much more clearly Christian, but it is also very controversial, since it does not appear in the Codex Regius text of the poem. The version preserved in *Hauksbók* states:

> Then the powerful, mighty one, he who rules over everything,
> will come from above, to the judgement place of the gods. (Stanza 65)

Since Stanza 65 is found in only one of the two texts of *Völuspá*, some editors and translators have omitted it from printed versions of the poem. To do so, however, implies a judgement about which is the *better* version – there is no especial reason for regarding the Codex Regius text as being inherently superior to that of *Hauksbók*, as both manuscripts are of roughly the same age. The decision to leave out Stanza 65 is based upon editors' ideas of what a more authentic *Völuspá* should be like. All we can say for sure is that one version contains a stanza which seems to include a reference to the arrival of Christ in majesty, descending to earth after the rule of the pagan gods has come to an end.

A reading of *Völuspá* that ignores this stanza therefore denies an important

aspect of Christian influence on the poem. It implicitly favours a ‘pagan’ interpretation over a ‘Christian’ one. But there is plenty of other material in both preserved versions that suggests *Völuspá* was composed under direct and significant influence from Christian ideas. For example, *Völuspá*’s representation of bad behaviour and its consequences often seems to reflect Christian moral attitudes. People are punished for swearing false oaths, for murder and for seducing other men’s wives (Stanza 39). All of these acts would have been seen as undesirable according to pagan codes of ethics, certainly, but they also relate to Christianity’s seven deadly sins – one of which, adultery, is described using the same word (*hordómr*) that we find in Norse Christian sermons. And people seem to be punished for this wickedness in a landscape that is like the Christian hell: the ‘sinners’ have to wade a river that ‘flows with knives and swords’ (called Slíðr in Stanza 36). A weapon-bearing river is a feature of hell in an influential Christian text, the *Visio Godeschalcus*, where it forms one of the torments of the damned souls. Rivers more generally are a common feature of hell-fire ordeals in medieval Christian vision literature, and the description of murderers and seducers ‘wading turbid streams’ near the poisonous hall on Nástrandir (‘corpse-shores’) (Stanzas 38–39) has often reminded people of the Christian hell. Pagan Norse cosmology did not, as far as we can tell, maintain that there was a mythological location where those who broke a code of ethics would be punished for their ‘sins’. But Christianity did, and *Völuspá* appears to.

Most scholars now accept that *Völuspá* is a product of a culture in which Christianity and paganism co-existed and where both the pagan and Christian mythologies were well known and relatively sophisticated. The poem seems to fit best into an epoch in which there was some degree of religious tension, if not outright conflict: while it is the most potent expression of Norse myth to have survived from the pagan period, *Völuspá*’s apocalyptic vision is suffused with a sense of doom. It suggests that the world of the old gods is coming to an end, and that it will be replaced by something better. The obvious candidate for this ‘better world’ is the one that Christianity offered, even though, except for Stanza 65 in *Hauksbók*, the poem makes no explicit reference to God or Christ. We do not know whether the poet was a pagan who had been exposed to Christianity and who sensed that the writing was on the wall for his religion, or perhaps a recent convert who retained his full knowledge of pagan myth alongside the realization that there was no longer any future for Odin, Thor and their brethren. In either case, *Völuspá* is built

on a fault line between the two religious cultures, and this fault shows every sign of being about to open, threatening to engulf the world. *Völuspá* is not unique among eddic poems in this respect: its shorter sister-poem, the interpolated part of *Hyndluljóð*, has a reference to a new god's arrival that is notably similar to *Völuspá*, Stanza 65:

> Then will come another, even mightier,
> though I do not dare to name his name;
> few can now see further than when
> Odin has to meet the wolf.[35]

Both these poems combine traditional signs of the world's impending destruction with hints of a single, unnamed mythological figure representing a new world to come. If the two *Völuspás* – the 'shorter' as well as the standard version – are genuinely pagan works, that does not mean that they must be 'pre-Christian'. Indeed, despite the breadth and depth of their mythological content, both poems are *post-Christian* pagan texts. They seem to belong to a syncretistic cultural situation, one in which poets and audiences were aware of, and influenced by, both religions simultaneously.

The question of where and when *Völuspá* was composed remains unanswered. It is usually dated to around 1000, which is at least symbolically appropriate for a poem dealing in such an immediate way with the effects of religious change. Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000, at the end of a decade in which the conflict between Norwegian pagans – represented by Jarl Hákon and his poets – and the Christians of Óláfr Tryggvason's party seemed to have been comprehensively settled in favour of the latter. As it stands, *Völuspá* is unmistakeably an Icelandic poem, but we must remember that it had probably circulated for generations in oral form before being written down in its two thirteenth-century versions. We do not know how much the poem changed over the course of this long transmission; nor can we trace its travels around Scandinavia. While some scholars think that *Völuspá* is and always has been an Icelandic product, others have identified the Scandinavian communities in the British Isles as its original home, and Norway is another strong possibility. Of the three options, I think attributing *Völuspá*'s composition to late tenth-century Norway – to the cultural world in which Hákon's poets operated – has the most to recommend it.

In a classic study, the philologist Helmut de Boor identified many correspondences between the religious language of Jarl Hákon's skalds and

Völuspá's vocabulary for the pagan gods.[36] The frequent use of the collective noun *regin*, for example, which seems to refer to the gods' role in controlling or binding together the universe, is characteristic of the Hlaðir-poets' work, but is found much less widely in other skaldic poetry. On their own, the links between *Völuspá* and these late tenth-century skaldic texts might be no more than coincidence, but when we consider them alongside other circumstantial evidence, it seems to me that de Boor's arguments present a compelling case for regarding Hákon's court – or a very similar milieu – as a possible breeding ground for this greatest of Nose mythological poems. The work of Hákon's skalds displays the fullest range of mythological knowledge seen in any single datable group of skaldic poems; *Völuspá* requires an equally broad frame of reference from both its author and its audience. We have seen too that Hákon's poets were interested in composing full-length mythological poems, and I have suggested that other eddic poems – like *Hyndluljóð* and *För Skírnis* – tie in with the distinctive religious attitudes that Hákon's poets promoted. Above all, however, *Völuspá* fits in well with the atmosphere of religious tension that seems to characterize Hákon's reign. The earl's skalds were engaging in a sort of pagan poetic revival, and it seems likely that this resurgence of mythological verse was triggered at least partly as a defence mechanism against Christianity, which was gaining a foothold in Norway.

Völuspá's heightened, apocalyptic tone and its distinctive imagery that imitates or parodies Christian motifs, speaks to a feeling that the pagan world was in flux and under threat. We find the same feeling in the poetry associated with Hákon's court. The old gods were no less real to Norwegian pagans of the period than they had been before, and no less important to their culture, but Christianity could not be ignored; it had to be accommodated within their worldview. *Völuspá* seems to me to be an excellent example of what happens – to mix metaphors – when the melting pot turns into a pressure cooker: by blending traditional myths with elements drawn from the incoming culture, it helps pagans to make sense of and come to terms with the changing world that confronts them. By doing this it may help to stop tensions from boiling over. It does not necessarily indicate that Norsemen of the late tenth century believed that the end of the world was imminent, but it shows an awareness that dramatic change was occurring. The world does not come to a full stop at the end of *Völuspá*; it takes on a new – and better – form. If *Völuspá* can be read as a performance of the last rites for Scandinavian paganism, it also offers the hope that what comes next will be a

better world, a new golden age. It is both a deeply and intrinsically pagan poem, and one that recognizes paganism's limitations and looks forward to its downfall: this may be the end of the world as we know it – it seems to say – but that is not necessarily a bad thing.

CONCLUSION

Whether as a proud restatement of pagan identity, a defensive and partly imitative reaction against Christian ideas, or a propagandizing tool for asserting the ruler's authority and right to sovereignty over the land, the poetry associated with Jarl Hákon provides us with an unparalleled insight into a community of skalds composing verse in support of a dominant ideology. In this period, we see myth at work in society, myth being consciously manipulated for political ends, and myth changing in response to external pressures. Myth-making does not occur in a vacuum: real people do it, for real reasons, and their myths change as the world around them changes. Of course, Hákon's poets inherited much of their mythological material from longstanding traditions; they told similar stories about the same gods as their ancestors had told for generations. But they were not quite the same stories, as the myths had new jobs to do. Along with changing cultural needs and priorities came new or radically altered myths; in particular, the shadow of Christianity seems to have prompted Hákon's poets to new heights of invention as they used traditional myths in support of their patron's position, which was so closely bound up with his relationship to the gods and their cults.

It might seem strange that a period of such great religious turbulence should produce so much mythological material, but in fact it makes very good sense: myths are stories that explain things about how the world is or explain how the world should be. When one belief community wishes to suppress, overtake or replace another – as Christians were aiming to displace paganism in Denmark, Norway and Iceland – it uses its myths to explain how its worldview works and why it is superior to the old one. At the same time, the threatened culture can use its own myths to assert its independence, vitality and strength in the face of its competitor. We might see in Hákon's Norway a sort of mythological Darwinism at work. Pagan myths adapt in

order to attempt to survive, either by strengthening religious sentiment among pagan populations, driving off their Christian rivals, or else by growing more to resemble Christian myths, so that some elements of traditional culture could be preserved in the face of the final defeat that *Völuspá* suggests may have been inevitable. The pagan poetry of late tenth-century Norway is so vibrant and vital because there was so much at stake. Of course, the pagans lost the argument in Norway just as they had in Denmark – and as they would in Iceland and, eventually, Sweden. But their myths lived on: in the next chapter we will investigate how and why that happened.

5

Pagan Myths under Conversion: Norway and Iceland, c. 980–1000

The introduction of Christianity to Norway was a slow, painful process. As we saw in the last chapter, the religious identity of the nation was closely bound up with the king's personal preferences, and Norway oscillated between paganism and Christianity depending upon who was in charge. For much of the tenth century, the two religions were both viable, living systems of belief and practice in Norway. But we do not know much about how ordinary people responded to Christianity – did they see it as a threat to traditions that already met their religious needs? Were they receptive to the missionaries' preaching? Did they simply find it irrelevant to their daily lives? Did the spread of Christianity through their homeland reinforce their identity as pagans, and make them cling all the more tightly to the old ways? We do not have very good answers to all these questions, since our impression of the Christianization of Norway is coloured by the nature of the sources. Jarl Hákon's poets show the cultural impact of religion in a high-status, elite community when they use religious imagery as propaganda in support of Hákon's 'state paganism'. It is impossible to tell whether their poems represent popular ideas about paganism or whether they are designed to shape public opinion: the latter seems more likely.

I argued in the last chapter that Christianity's impact on pagan culture in Hákon's Norway was, perhaps ironically, initially a positive one. The perceived threat of the incoming religion to Hákon's authority as a pagan ruler seems to have been a major spur to the creation of the myths about him that the poets promulgated in their work. We also saw signs that myths of the old gods were beginning to be influenced by stories about the new one.

Christianity, in other words, was a stimulus to new and innovative expressions of pagan culture and identity. Like the speck of grit in an oyster that turns into a pearl, Christianity infiltrated the Norwegian poetic consciousness and lodged there, irritating the skalds' imaginations until it prompted them to come up with remarkable new myths. Christianity's diffusion around Norway in the second half of the tenth century understandably produced a pagan reaction; and this reaction led to a great revivification of traditional poetic forms, increased depth and sophistication in the skalds' use of mythological stories and imagery, and possibly the creation of new, 'syncretistic' myths like *Völuspá*.

Jarl Hákon, however, could not live forever. His downfall was at least partly precipitated by his sexual appetites. When he demanded that the wife of an influential farmer should spend the night with him, he found that the propaganda suggesting he was the rightful husband of all Norway had either not reached this far or carried no weight: the farmer refused his request, and summoned the men of the district to rise up against the earl. At the same time, Óláfr Tryggvason, the main rival claimant to the throne, arrived in the fjord where the earl and his men had moored their ships. Word got back to Hákon about the incipient rebellion and he fled to the home of one of his mistresses, Þóra of Rimul, who hid him and his companion – a slave named Þormóðr Kark who had served Hákon all his life – in a pit beneath a pig-sty. And in these decidedly unheroic circumstances Hákon met his end: Óláfr Tryggvason, arriving at the farmstead in search of Hákon, proclaimed that a large reward would be given to the man who killed him. Following a prophetic dream in which he saw Óláfr placing a golden necklace around his neck, Kark cut the earl's throat as he slept. But his payment was a bitter one: Óláfr had Kark beheaded, too, and the heads of earl and slave alike were fastened to a gallows and pelted with stones. With that, the man who had embodied paganism in and for Norway for three decades lay dead, defeated and derided. It is difficult not to regard his demise as representing the symbolic defeat of paganism as Norway's dominant religious system.

Heimskringla has an interesting summary of Hákon's career that also includes one final verse in honour of him, composed by another of his court skalds, Þórleifr Rauðfeldarson:

> There was such fierce hatred against Jarl Hákon among the men of the Trøndelag that no one might call him by any other name than 'the evil earl'. And that name stuck to him for a long time. But the truth of the matter is that he had many qualifications for

leadership: first, an exalted lineage, and therewith shrewdness and sagacity to use his power, briskness in battle as well as a lucky hand in winning the victory and slaying his enemies. As Þorleifr Rauðfeldarson says:

> Hákon, we heard of no
> greater earl than you
> governing under heaven –
> your glory grew greater in war.
> You sent nine princes to Odin –
> the raven feeds on the
> flesh of fallen men –
> your fame spread far and wide.

Earl Hákon exceeded everyone in generosity, and it was great ill fortune that a chieftain should have died as he did. But the reason for this was chiefly that the time had come when heathen worship and idolators were done away with and Christianity took their place.[1]

For the (Christian) author of this account, Hákon's defeat was inevitable because the defeat of paganism by Christianity was inevitable. Hákon had had the chance to adapt himself to the prevailing climate when he was baptized at the insistence of the king of Denmark. When he at once went back to the old ways and, moreover, bound up his personal identity and public authority so closely with the old gods, he sealed his own fate. Þórleifr's poem, fittingly enough, uses mythological imagery in its final praise of Hákon; but the days when Norwegian kings would be commemorated in these pagan terms were now over.

THE CHRISTIAN KING AND HIS PAGAN POET

Óláfr Tryggvason was installed as king – allegedly by popular mandate – shortly after Hákon's death. The new king was as closely associated with Norway's new religion as Hákon had been with the old, becoming almost the living embodiment of Christianity in the land for the duration of his short but remarkable reign. Óláfr never became a saint – his successor Óláfr Haraldsson, who was regarded as the true apostle to the Norsemen, was the first Norwegian to be canonized. Medieval authors represent Óláfr Tryggvason as playing the role of John the Baptist to St Óláfr's Christ. But Tryggvason is portrayed in a markedly hagiographic manner in the extensive

tradition of writings about him that survive; he may not have brought the conversion of Norway to completion – hardly surprising, since his reign only lasted for five years, and his kingdom was one in which pagan cults had been heavily promoted by his predecessor – but he certainly set the country on the path towards full Christianization.

Óláfr was the son of Tryggvi Óláfsson, ruler of the Hringaríki province and member of one of the rival dynasties to the family of Eiríkr blóðøx and Queen Gunnhildr. He had been brought up as a pagan at the court of a Russian king – his claim to the throne had made it too dangerous for him to remain in Norway. But Óláfr rejected paganism: the sagas report that he refused to join in with pagan rites even as a child, to the displeasure of his foster-father. In his adolescence and young manhood, Óláfr became a noted Viking warrior, raiding widely around northern coastlines and winning fame for his prowess in battle. At the same time, his Christian faith deepened and developed as he met other Christians and learned about their doctrines. The sagas make no comment about the apparent incongruence of Óláfr's split personality: at one moment a devout novice learning about God's power and Christ's love, the next a bloodthirsty pirate. His victims were normally pagans, after all. He was baptized in Scilly, off the coast of Britain, before sailing back to Norway to assert his rightful claim to the kingdom and to make Christianity the national religion, once and for all.

Although there are many versions of Óláfr's life-story which differ in their content and emphasis, a clear picture of the king as a saintly missionary emerges from all of them. Óláfr used several strategies to promote his aim of Christianizing Norway: he forced or cajoled high-status pagans into converting, and was not afraid of killing those who remained opposed to the new religion – particularly those characters the sagas refer to as 'sorcerers'. He had churches built and encouraged churchmen to travel widely, preaching and promoting the faith; he destroyed temples and idols wherever he found them. In the version of the story written by the Icelandic monk, Oddr Snorrason, Óláfr's final victory over paganism is symbolized by his destruction of a famous statue of Freyr in the Trøndelag – Jarl Hákon's former power-base and the region most closely connected to his version of 'state paganism'.

All of Óláfr's activities were aimed at the suppression of pagan religious practices and their replacement with new religious norms. Newly converted Norwegians were not supposed to take part in sacrifices or other forms of

pagan ritual; they were encouraged to see their old gods as mere idols, false deities who could do nothing for their worshippers. Yet we know that stories about the gods and their deeds survived, since they are available to us in later manuscripts; it is less clear how they survived, or why, or how this radical formal shift away from paganism and towards Christianity re-shaped people's attitudes towards pagan mythology.

The best way to gauge the effect of conversion on attitudes towards these myths is to look again at the verse produced by skalds in Norway over the course of the Christianization process. Like his predecessors both pagan and Christian, Óláfr Tryggvason employed court poets – indeed, he was possibly a poet himself: two stanzas attributed to the king have survived, although the likelihood that Óláfr really composed them is slim. In any case, neither of these short poems contains a single reference to a pagan myth. They are not yet fully Christian poetry, in that they draw on no explicitly Christian narratives or imagery, but traditional kennings rooted in pagan myth are conspicuous by their absence. The decline in mythological kenning types is perhaps the most striking development in skaldic poetry through the eleventh century. Skaldic verse remained popular – Óláfr Tryggvason's successor, Óláfr the saint, was served by more court skalds than any other Scandinavian king – but references to pagan mythology seem to have become taboo in Christian circles, even though this change placed considerable restrictions on poets' repertoire of kennings.

A particularly interesting example of how the change of religion affected Norse poets is provided by a story about Hallfreðr Óttarsson. Hallfreðr served Jarl Hákon, in whose honour he had composed some notably pagan poems full of traditional mythological references and imagery. Hallfreðr was famous enough to have had a saga composed about him, and from this *Hallfreðar saga* we are able to gain insight into the problems facing pagan poets in the Christian era, and the measures that one was forced to take in order to maintain his position at court and in society. *Hallfreðar saga* – which survives in two versions, one of which is incorporated into the *Greatest saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* – is a mainly unreliable source that has fictionalized the events of Hallfreðr's life. But it records a lot of his poetry, and most scholars are prepared to regard these texts as genuine, late tenth-century verse. These poems provide a direct glimpse into the worldview of a pagan poet as it changed in response to the vastly different religious environments in which he was forced to work.

We saw in the previous chapter that Hallfreðr was an enthusiastic participant in the programme of pagan poetic propaganda by which Jarl Hákon was elevated to semi-divine status as a descendant of the gods and a sort of sacred husband to the Norwegian homeland. Hallfreðr's *Hákonardrápa* is steeped in mythological imagery, in keeping with its function as religious propaganda. There is no real evidence of what form of religion Hallfreðr practised, but there is every reason to assume that he was a committed and active pagan, whose poetry was rooted in his religious knowledge and attitudes. When Hákon died, however, Hallfreðr no longer had a market for his poetry. According to his saga, following Hákon's death Hallfreðr decided to quit the country, realizing that a pagan poet would enjoy less success in Óláfr's new Norway. But Hallfreðr put his fate in the hands of the gods: he says that if he gets a wind for Sweden, they will make offerings to Freyr (whose particular association with the Swedes was clearly understood by the Icelandic author of the saga); Thor and Odin will receive his thanks if the prevailing winds carry the ship back to his native Iceland. As it turns out, a fierce headwind drives Hallfreðr and his shipmates straight back to the Norwegian shore, where King Óláfr saves them from being drowned in a shipwreck.[2]

When they have met – and Hallfreðr has been placed under obligation to Óláfr for saving his life – the king at once suggests that Hallfreðr should come over to the Christian camp. Hallfreðr is surprisingly willing to accept the new religion and to be baptized, on the condition that Óláfr will agree to serve as his lord and patron henceforth; that he will fill the vacancy in Hallfreðr's life that Hákon's death has left, in other words. The king agrees, and Hallfreðr is baptized at once. It seems clear that Hallfreðr's decision to convert is motivated by worldly reasons: he needs the support of a powerful ruler like Óláfr to maintain his cultural prestige and socio-economic status.

This impression is confirmed by the events of the story. After receiving a very rudimentary Christian education – two of the king's entourage, both lay-people, teach him the Lord's Prayer and the Creed – Hallfreðr hangs around at the edges of Óláfr's circle, seeming to lack a purpose at the court. He eventually asks the king to hear a poem that he has composed for him, but Óláfr at first refuses this gesture, which would have been seen as an honourable gift in Hákon's day, when such praise was the skald's main function. Hallfreðr complains that if Óláfr will not hear his poetry then their relationship will suffer, adding that this rejection might well lead him to

forsake his new religion, on the grounds that it is less ‘conducive to poetry’ (*skáldligr* in Old Norse) than the old one had been.[3] Eventually, Óláfr relents and agrees to listen to the poem, which the saga does not record. But the king declares Hallfreðr to be a ‘troublesome poet’ (*vandræðaskáld*), and Hallfreðr has been known by this nickname ever since.

Hallfreðr’s religious outlook continues to prove troublesome even after the king finally gives him an audience for his poem. The saga states that Hallfreðr ‘did not blaspheme the [pagan] gods, although other men spoke ill of them; he said there was no need to blame them, even though people didn’t want to believe in them’. This attitude is hardly that of a committed Christian, but it is typical of ideas prevalent among many first-generation converts from Norse paganism, who saw the Christian God as being exactly the same sort of thing, conceptually speaking, as Odin, Thor or Freyr. God and Christ effectively became members of the pantheon, in whom people could choose to believe if they wished, just as pagans had been free to attach themselves to one god or many. Missionaries found it difficult to teach pagans that there was a qualitative difference between the old gods and the new, that belief in the one true God rendered their old beliefs obsolete, or that the two systems were absolutely mutually exclusive. While we know that Christian teaching eventually did supplant these heretical attitudes with a more orthodox outlook on the nature of God’s divinity, the process was a slow one.

For a pagan like Hallfreðr, whose identity had been so closely bound up with a pagan ruler and pagan poetry, the necessary conceptual shift did not come easily. One day – so the saga tells us – King Óláfr overhears Hallfreðr recite a verse:

> That was earlier, when I sacrificed well to the lord of Hliðskjalf [Odin] himself, him of quick mind. There is a change in the fortunes of men.[4]

Here, Hallfreðr seems to be nostalgic for his old religion, specifying the particular connection with Odin that we know many skalds felt. Óláfr finds this verse utterly unacceptable, and tells Hallfreðr so, encouraging him to compose something more suitable. There follows a sequence of verses, each of which proves unsatisfactory to the king until the very last one. These stanzas – often called Hallfreðr’s ‘conversion verses’ – illustrate a remarkable progression in his religious outlook. We do not know how heartfelt they are – they were, after all, supposedly composed with his Christian lord breathing down Hallfreðr’s neck. But they do show what

factors were at play in shaping the poet's attitude towards his new religion.

In the second conversion stanza, Hallfreðr emphasizes just how closely linked his identity as a poet was with his identity as a pagan:

> All the family have composed songs for Odin's favour; I remember the enduring works of the generation of our ancestors. But reluctantly, since the rule of Viðrir [Odin] suited the skald well, I bestow hatred upon the first husband of Frigg [Odin], because we serve Christ.

Hallfreðr's reluctance to abandon the religion of his ancestors arises because the 'enduring works' of previous generations of poets were composed for Odin, the greatest patron of the skalds' art. Now, however, he acknowledges that he cannot worship Frigg's husband – a transparent kenning for Odin – because 'we serve Christ'. His change of religion has been triggered by the communal conversion that has accompanied Óláfr's ascent to the throne of Norway, not by his own choice.

In the third conversion stanza – Óláfr had hardly been better pleased with the second than with the first – Hallfreðr finally starts to reveal that he has some understanding, as a Christian, of the flaws in paganism, which he says is founded in deceit:

> Gratifier of men [Óláfr], we renounce the name of the priest of raven sacrifice [Odin] from heathendom, who fomented deceit in exchange for people's praise.

The idea that pagan religion was based upon a deceit or delusion is a common theme in many medieval Christian writings. Hallfreðr suggests that Odin has deliberately misled people into believing in falsehoods in exchange for their worship. Importantly, however, Odin still has some sort of independent reality for Hallfreðr, even though he blames him for blinding pagans to (Christian) truth. The kenning 'priest of raven sacrifice' must refer to Odin, although it is curious to hear a god called his own 'priest'. Scholars do not think that this phrase indicates that ravens were really sacrificed in Odin's honour in pagan times, but that Hallfreðr's kenning simply combines two of Odin's chief symbols – the raven and sacrificial killing – into one.

Only in the next stanza does Hallfreðr begin to approach the proper respect for Christian beliefs that Óláfr expects:

> Let Freyr, along with Freyja and mighty Thor, be angry with me. Last year I forsook the delusion of Njörðr [paganism]; may the fiends have mercy on Grímnir [Odin]. I will beseech Christ and God for all love: the son's anger is hateful to me; he alone in glory

> possesses power under the father of the earth.

Now Hallfreðr brackets all the main pagan gods together; he again refers to paganism as a ‘delusion’, and he finally admits that from this point forwards he will only turn to the Christian deity, Father and Son, for love. He will do so out of a fitting fear of Christ’s anger, since Christ is now the agent of God’s power. Yet this verse still retains peculiar traces of sympathy for the old gods: he asks that the ‘fiends’ be merciful to Odin. He does not equate the pagan gods with demons, as many Christian writers encouraged people to do, and he seems to hope that Odin – who still exists for him, despite his new-found preference for Christ – will not be treated too harshly by the new religious authorities. Hallfreðr does not have a very advanced grasp of Christian theology – the idea that Christ possesses power under God represents a misunderstanding of the nature of the Trinity and might be thought almost heretical – but at a basic level his spiritual orientation seems nearly complete. He even invents a kenning for the Christian God – ‘father of the earth’ – which both fits in with Christian doctrines and resembles the types of kenning (‘husband of Jörð’, for example) by which he had formerly referred to the pagan gods and to Jarl Hákon.

By this stage in the sequence, King Óláfr has become happier with Hallfreðr’s poetry, but he still requires one final verse from him. In this stanza, Hallfreðr refers to the change in people’s belief in more orthodox terms, although he still includes references to pagan myth:

> This is the custom with the impeller of the people of Sogn [King Óláfr] that sacrifices are forbidden. We shall escape most time-honoured destinies of the Norns. All people abandon the remedy of Odin [paganism] in favour of the Cross. I am compelled away from the children of Njörðr [the pagan gods] to pray to Christ.

Hallfreðr emphasizes that the conversion has required people to alter their religious behaviour. No longer do they sacrifice in the old manner; rather, they pray directly to Christ to achieve their religious aims. Thus they escape the ‘time-honoured destinies of the Norns’. In *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda*, the Norns are the female figures who foresee and control the fate of all men and women and of the world itself. As we have seen, even among pagans there was an awareness that the world the old gods ruled was doomed. One of the most tempting propositions that Christianity offered to converts was the prospect of an eternal life that would allow them to escape their mortal fate.

At the conclusion of Hallfreðr’s ‘conversion verses’, Óláfr seems content

that the poet now sings from the correct hymn-sheet. But Hallfreðr's conversion is not complete, even now. His saga records that Hallfreðr's commitment wavers whenever he is away from the king: his attachment to Christianity is controlled by external pressures, and we might doubt how genuine his new beliefs are. When travelling in Sweden, for example, far from Óláfr's influence, the saga tells us that he had forgotten his Christianity to such an extent that his only act of piety was to blow the sign of the Cross in the foam on his beer before drinking. (It is possible that this scene in *Hallfreðar saga* has been influenced by the story about King Hákon góði performing a similar act at the pagan feast, as we saw in Chapter 4.) Hallfreðr also marries a pagan woman from a Swedish family that still sacrifices to the old gods, which further weakens Christianity's grip on him. It takes an almost miraculous intervention, in the form of a dream-vision in which King Óláfr appears to him and rebukes him for back-sliding, to bring Hallfreðr to his senses and force him to return to Norway and into the Christian fold.

Upon his return to Norway, the king tells Hallfreðr that he must make amends for his failure to adhere to Christian norms. As a form of penance, he has Hallfreðr compose a poem, which the saga calls *Uppreistardrápa* ('atonement poem' or 'poem about the creation' – the meaning is unclear).[5] This composition, which the author of the *Greatest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* calls the 'best of poems', does not survive. But it seems clear that it must have been an explicitly Christian poem from start to finish. It is the first time in the saga that Hallfreðr composes verse that lacks a pagan frame of reference, a fact that is reflected in the very positive reaction that it provokes in Óláfr. Although we do not know what this poem says, or even its subject matter, it marks a watershed in Hallfreðr's career as a poet. After he has composed *Uppreistardrápa*, his poetry eschews all references to the pagan gods and any traditional mythological imagery. He still composes in the traditional skaldic idiom, but now his verse reflects his new position as the court poet of a Christian ruler by avoiding the types of language that so annoyed Óláfr in the 'conversion verses'. Hallfreðr learns that it is possible to be a Christian skald; he can maintain his identity as a poet and a servant of the king even under the new regime. Once he has integrated his religious identity with his socio-cultural function, Hallfreðr never again comes close to reverting to paganism.

That is not to say that his late verse is particularly Christian; it seems that it took considerable time for skalds to apply their art to Christian subjects and

to create a new vocabulary that allowed them to talk about the new religion in as sophisticated a way as their predecessors had used pagan myth. But the version of Hallfreðr's story that is preserved in the *Greatest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* records one further stanza that seems to reveal the extent to which this former pagan's worldview has been affected by his conversion to Christianity. According to this version of the story, it is the very last verse that Hallfreðr composes, when he knows his death is imminent. In his attitude to dying, he could hardly be more different to those earlier poets who had looked forward to an afterlife full of fighting and feasting in Odin's Valhalla:

> I would die now straightaway and without sorrow – I was harsh of tongue in my youth – if I knew that my soul was saved; I know that I grieve over nothing except that I fear the punishment of hell; let God choose the moment when there shall be an end to life; everybody must die.[6]

Hallfreðr still expresses himself using the traditional *dróttkvætt* meter, but his thoughts now dwell only on the Christian God. He acknowledges him as the controller of men's destinies, and has learned that one's deeds in life will determine one's fate after death. The very idea that he has a 'soul' that can be saved is one that had no direct analogy in pagan religion. And in this verse – if we accept it to be genuine and not the invention of a pious saga-author – Hallfreðr makes the first recorded reference to the Christian hell as a place of punishment in any Old Norse text. We can infer from this that his Christian education must have continued long beyond his initial conversion, working its transformative effects on his spiritual identity until, at the very moment of his death, all traces of his former beliefs have been effaced.

Hallfreðr's conversion is but one among thousands and perhaps it does not represent the reality of religious change as it was actually experienced by individuals at the end of the tenth century so much as a later author's idealized conception of how conversion *should* happen. But it does provide us with an important insight into the way in which conversion affected Norse poets and the poetry they composed. There was undoubtedly a marked shift away from mythological references in the work of eleventh-century skalds. The mythological kenning was no longer the foundation of their technique, and the use of this type of poetic device declined dramatically, although it never disappeared altogether from the skalds' armoury of poetic expression. Perhaps, as Christianization took hold, court poets could no longer expect their audiences to possess the range of mythological knowledge necessary to

understand traditional pagan kenning-types; undoubtedly, strongly Christian patrons like the Óláfrs Tryggvasson and Haraldsson would have disapproved of hearing their deeds praised by comparison with Thor or Odin. But we must remember that what the conversion-era kings forbade in their realms was pagan *practice*, not pagan myth *per se*. Hallfreðr's development as a Christian is symbolized by the decline in the mythological content of his poetry, but his story reveals that King Óláfr was really concerned to suppress paganism as an active social force. Pagan rituals were now taboo, but their suppression could not – and did not – result directly in the sudden disappearance of traditional Norse poetry and its underlying myths from people's consciousness. The expression of these myths in poetic form undoubtedly entered a period of dormancy, particularly in Norway; but the fact that Norse mythology sprang up in new and vibrant forms in thirteenth-century Iceland suggests that the flame of pagan myth, as a cultural rather than religious phenomenon, was never entirely extinguished. People soon learned that it was best not to believe in Odin, Thor or Freyr, and they were certainly not free to worship them as they had previously done. But the *stories* of the old gods were resilient, as myths tend to be, and merely awaited a new generation of poets and authors who could bring them to life again in a Christian context. This revival would be a distinctively Icelandic movement.

THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND

So far, our discussion of myth-making in the North Sea world has concentrated on Norway, because Norway was the centre of traditional poetic culture during the late Viking Age. It was there that kings and earls fostered skaldic verse through their patronage, and where connections between myth, religion and poetry seem to have been closest. As we have seen, the dynastic conflicts which gripped Norwegian society during the transition from paganism to Christianity created a particularly fertile environment for the production and transmission of traditional myths in new forms. The situation in tenth-century Iceland was rather different. Icelandic skalds were renowned for their poetic skill, but they most often employed their talents at the courts of Norwegian (and other foreign) rulers, where the established position of court poet offered them a pathway to positions of status, wealth and honour

that were not available in ‘republican’ Iceland. But Icelandic poets must have learned their trade in Iceland, even if many chose to practise it abroad.

Iceland, however, was not in an identical situation to Norway with regard to religion and its cultural expressions. In the absence of a centralized system of authority, there was no potential for ‘state paganism’ of the kind that Jarl Hákon and his poets promoted. Odin, the quintessential god of royal authority and martial power, seems to have been an unpopular cultic figure in Iceland. His worship was restricted largely to poets – like Egill Skallagrímsson – who perceived themselves as having a special relationship with Odin in his role as custodian and provider of artistic inspiration. Place-name evidence suggests that Thor was probably the most popular god among Icelanders between the settlement and the conversion, although there is also evidence for the worship of Freyr. Overall, however, paganism in Iceland was even more diffuse and libertarian than in the rest of Scandinavia; people were free to choose their own religious affiliations without top-down pressure from authorities, whether religious or secular.

The place of mythology in pre-Christian Icelandic culture is difficult to locate. Icelandic skalds clearly knew versions of many of the major myths – their use of mythological kennings confirms this. But we do not know in what form these stories circulated, or what uses were found for them beyond brief, allusive references in skaldic poetry. It is impossible to tell whether any of the surviving eddic poems circulated in Iceland at this period; they certainly have an Icelandic provenance, but we cannot securely identify their existence there prior to being committed to manuscripts in the thirteenth century. Because the poems composed by Icelanders in the tenth century were mostly produced for delivery at foreign courts, it is possible that their mythological content was influenced by the attitudes towards the gods that obtained among the poets’ foreign audiences, rather than in Iceland. It seems most likely, however, that Iceland and Norway remained part of a broadly identical religious and mythological system, and that poets in both countries knew similar versions of similar myths, even if they manipulated these myths in different ways.

Úlfr Uggason’s poem *Húsdrápa* (‘House-Poem’) provides a rare example of a purely mythological poem that originated in a specifically Icelandic context. According to the much later account of *Laxdæla saga*, *Húsdrápa* was commissioned by the chieftain Óláfr pái (‘the peacock’) Höskuldsson in about 985, to celebrate the construction of his new hall, which was as

ostentatious as his nickname would suggest. Úlfr's poem is 'ekphrastic': it describes scenes from myth that supposedly adorned the walls of Óláfr's halls in pictorial form. In this respect, it is a rather old-fashioned composition; it resembles the shield-poems that were in vogue among Norwegian poets like Bragi Boddason and Þjóðólfr ór Hvinir almost a century before. It is likely that Óláfr, who had connections with an Irish royal dynasty and who lived in fittingly magnificent style, would have been gratified by the poet's adoption of a genre that had previously been thought appropriate for the court of Haraldr hárfagri.

Like the earlier shield-poems, *Húsdrápa* provides glimpses into the narratives of several different myths. As it has come down to us – as usual with this type of poem, it is found in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál – Húsdrápa* is almost certainly incomplete. It draws upon three myths: the perennially popular subject of Thor's adventures while fishing for the Miðgarðsormr; a description of Baldr's funeral; and, in a single stanza, a reference to an otherwise entirely lost myth featuring Loki and Heimdallr.

Húsdrápa begins, however, with an introductory half-stanza that seems to confirm Úlfr's intent to praise Óláfr in the traditional, courtly style. What was good enough for Norwegian rulers was, it seems, just as good for this Icelandic chieftain:

> I bring heart-glad Óláfr Hildr's [battle's] noise-maker's [Odin's] mind-fjord-liquid [mead of poetry].
> I will greet him with Grímnir's [Odin's] gift [poetry].[7]

Like his Norwegian predecessors, Úlfr conceives of poetry (and his role as poet) in an explicitly Odinic frame of reference; his 'mead of poetry' kennings are complex and fully developed. Although most of the poem is devoted to the mythological scenes, praising Óláfr is also an important aspect of Úlfr's strategy. By placing himself in the tradition of Norse poets who viewed themselves as fellow drinkers of Odin's mead, he further strengthens the links between his composition and high-status Norwegian court poetry, in which this type of opening stanza is typical. There is no evidence that Úlfr travelled outside Iceland, and none that he ever operated at the court of a foreign ruler, but he knew the conventions of praise-poetry and the role of mythological tropes within them.

The second stanza of *Húsdrápa* makes an intriguing allusion to an otherwise unknown story about Loki and Heimdallr. There are no surviving

myths that make Heimdallr the central protagonist in a stand-alone narrative, as Úlfr appears to do in this text: normally the role that Heimdallr plays here would be taken by Thor, whose misadventures with Loki often appear as separate stories in both poetry and the prose of *Snorra Edda*. Heimdallr, who acts as the gods' watchman in *Völuspá*, blowing his great horn to signal the onset of the final battle at Ragnarök, remains an obscure figure in the myths, although various references to him in poetry imply that we must have lost quite a lot of information about him. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that Heimdallr was ever actively worshipped as part of a pagan cult. Like Loki, he is a mythological figure rather than a deity at work in people's lives. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri quotes a stanza from a lost eddic-style poem that he refers to as *Heimdalargaldr* ('Heimdallr's Spell or Chant') which states that Heimdallr is the 'offspring of nine mothers'. Snorri also thought that he was a son of Odin. But while Snorri describes Heimdallr's attributes and function within the mythological world, he only provides one example of an individual myth in which Heimdallr plays an active, leading role – the story to which Úlfr alludes in his poem:

> Renowned defender [Heimdallr] of the powers' way [Bífröst, the rainbow-bridge that links Ásgarðr with the other worlds], kind in counsel, competes with Farbauti's terribly sly son [Loki] at Singasteinn. The son of eight mothers plus one, mighty of mood, is first to get hold of the beautiful sea-kidney [jewel?]. I announce it in strands of praise.[8]

The reference to the 'son of eight plus one mothers' makes Heimdallr the protagonist of this myth, and we know that, according to some sources, Loki's father is the giant Farbauti. Beyond the basic identification of the two figures, however, virtually nothing is certain about what is going on in Úlfr's second stanza. We cannot know from the poem as it stands what or where 'Singasteinn' is; the striking imagery behind the kenning 'beautiful sea-kidney' is similarly obscure. Thus, the details of the action would be hidden behind the poem's diction, were it not for the fact that Snorri also tells us what was going on in this myth. According to Snorri, the 'sea-kidney' is Freyja's famous necklace, Brisingamen, and Loki and Heimdallr fought over this treasure in the form of seals. This curious detail is not present in Úlfr's version; scholars assume that the original form of the poem contained this and other information, since Snorri states that 'Úlfr composed a long passage in *Húsdrápa* based on this story'. But Snorri's précis of the story only includes the reference to seals above what is found in Stanza 2 of *Húsdrápa*:

it is doubtful how much of the lost portions of the poem Snorri really knew.

The myth of Baldr's death is best represented by the version that Snorri gives us in *Gylfaginning*, but it is also central to the events that lead up to Ragnarök in *Völuspá*. This story does not seem to have captured the imagination of many skalds, but Úlfr's poem confirms that the myth was in circulation in late tenth-century Iceland. Like other ekphrastic mythological poems, *Húsdrápa* does not so much narrate the myth as describe static tableaux from within the story. In this case, Úlfr's attention is occupied by Baldr's funeral: he does not tell us about the events leading up to his murder or follow the narrative threads through to Loki's punishment and the strife that follows his release. Úlfr provides us with a sequence of snapshots of different mythological beings travelling to the funeral:

> Battle-skilled Freyr rides in front to Odin's son's [Baldr's] pyre on a golden-bristled boar and governs hosts.
>
> Splendid Heimdallr rides to the pyre raised by gods for the fallen son [Baldr] of the strangely wise raven-tester [Odin], on his horse.
>
> Far-famed Hropta-Týr [Odin] rides to the mighty broad pyre of his son, and from my jaws flow words of praise.
>
> There I perceive valkyries and ravens accompanying the wise victory-tree [Odin] to the drinking of the holy offering [Baldr's funeral feast]. Within have appeared these motifs [i.e. these images have been depicted in Óláfr's hall].
>
> The most powerful mountain-Hildr [giantess] made the sea-Sleipnir [ship] lumber forward, while Hroptr's [Odin's] helmet-fire-power-investors [berserkers] felled her steed.[9]

These stanzas are relatively straightforward, with the exception of the last. In this verse we find the only reference in poetry to a curious part of the account of Baldr's funeral that Snorri provides in *Gylfaginning*. Since Snorri knew *Húsdrápa*, it seems likely that he has used it as his main source for his version of events. He tells us that the Æsir wished to place Baldr's body on his ship before setting fire to it and launching it out to sea, but found that nobody was strong enough to push Baldr's ship (Hringhorni, the 'biggest of all ships') down the rollers to the shore:

> So [the Æsir] sent to Giantland for a giantess called Hyrrokin. And when she arrived, riding a wolf and using vipers as reins, she dismounted from her steed, and Odin summoned four berserkers to look after the mount, and they were unable to hold it without knocking it down. Then Hyrrokin went to the prow of the boat and pushed it out

> with the first touch so that flame flew from the rollers and all lands quaked. Then Thor became angry and grasped his hammer and was about to smash her head until all the gods begged for grace for her.[10]

As we will see in the next chapter, Snorri's version of the Baldr-myth is perhaps his greatest achievement as a story-teller, as he weaves information drawn from a very wide range of sources into a coherent whole. Yet it may not resemble older forms of the myth very closely at all. Here we see how he embellishes the information that he obtained from *Húsdrápa* with details like the giantess's name, her exotic steed and the fact that Thor grew angry when she launched Baldr's ship. We can use Snorri's account to help us understand Úlfr's stanza, but as usual we find that this produces a sort of loop in the interpretation: we interpret Snorri's source by reference to Snorri's full account, but Snorri's account is based upon *his* interpretation of the same source that we rely on him to explain for us. Suffice it to say that Úlfr's description of Baldr's funeral is only paralleled by Snorri's, and that it is therefore difficult to know how much of this part of the story was found in other versions of the Baldr-myth.

Because Baldr is one of the few gods who returns to the new, arguably Christian world that rises up after Ragnarök, and because he is represented as being a pure and blameless 'sacrifice', myths that centre on this god in particular are often identified as bearing traces of Christian influence. Úlfr's poem, however, lacks any of the Christ-like attributes that attend Baldr's representation in some other myths. Pagan mythology was possibly slower to be influenced by Christian stories in Iceland than in Norway because Christianity was less of a threat to pagan Icelanders than to their cousins across the North Sea – as I argued in the last chapter, the convergence of the two religions played a very important role in shaping the new myths that Norwegian poets created at the very end of the pagan era. There were undoubtedly Christians in Iceland by the time that Úlfr composed *Húsdrápa*; indeed a few Christian families and individuals are recorded among the first wave of settlers over a century earlier. But Icelandic Christianity before the nation's formal conversion was diffuse and de-centralized; until Óláfr Tryggvason ascended to the throne of Norway and began – forcefully – to have the gospel spread around the Norse colonies, there had been no Christian authority figure to attempt to enforce the norms and practices of the new religion in Iceland. Just as Icelandic paganism was a largely private affair, pre-Christian Icelandic Christianity was a matter of personal choice

and conscience. It was not until the last decade of the tenth century that the encroachments of the Christian establishment, in the form of the Norwegian king's missionaries, began to cause tension and finally conflict between followers of the two religions in Iceland.

Less than two decades after Úlfr composed his impeccably pagan poem, Iceland became a Christian country. Úlfr himself was reputedly a staunch opponent of Christianity and its advocates, and a further stanza by him is quoted in the accounts of Iceland's conversion found in *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga*, both of which exist in fourteenth-century manuscript copies. Úlfr's last recorded verse is supposedly a response to a stanza by another pagan poet, Þorvaldr veili, who wished, along with many Icelanders, to vent his disgust at the activities of Þangbrandr, the Saxon priest whom Óláfr Tryggvason had sent to accomplish the conversion of Iceland by any means necessary. *Kristni saga* states that many Icelanders began to libel Þangbrandr and his colleague Guðleifr as he went around the country, before quoting Þorvaldr's scurrilous poem:

> To the unshakeable Úlfr, Uggi's son (I have no hate for the wielder of steel [warrior]), I send straight out of hand, a message, that the spear-storm's strengthener [warrior] drive out the spineless wolf of God [Þangbrandr] to appease the divine powers, and we repulse the other.

To which Úlfr replies:

> I'll not catch the cormorant to cave of teeth flown [i.e. 'I'll not take the bait'], although the sender is a well-tried swimmer in Hárbarðr's sanctuary-fjord [mead of poetry]. Of the heeder of sail-yard's horse [sailor] I guard against great harm – evil is underway – it's unlike me to snap at the fly.[11]

Even though Úlfr feels that the missionaries are doing great evil in his country, he is wary of slandering them as Þorvaldr had done. Subsequent events reward his tact and forbearance, as upon hearing Þorvaldr's verse Þangbrandr and Guðleifr tracked him down and killed him. On the same journey they killed a second poet, Vetrliði Sumarliðason (a fragment of whose poem addressed to Thor survives), over a similar libel. In a short space of time, Iceland had become a new front in the battle between paganism and Christianity, and poets seem to have been in the firing line: they had a particular attachment to paganism because of poetry's special associations with Odin and because poetry was the main vehicle for pagan myth; during these skirmishes poetry also became a weapon on the pagans' side. It was a

private language from which we might expect a Continental Christian like Þangbrandr to have been excluded, and a language which asserted the poets' religious-cultural identity as a separate and special one which was clearly different from and in opposition to the incomers.

Þangbrandr's mission to Iceland was a disaster that seems to have worked almost in spite of itself. According to the sagas, Óláfr Tryggvason sent him abroad as a form of penance for a range of misdemeanours that had already included buying an Irish slave-girl, killing a man in a duel and funding himself by embarking upon Viking raids when he had exhausted the money with which Óláfr had endowed his church on the island of Mostr. In Iceland, Þangbrandr preached the gospel with some success in certain areas of the country, while other regions proved utterly intractable. But he had already baptized several leading chieftains by the time he killed Vetrliði and Þorvaldr, for which act he was sentenced to outlawry. Þangbrandr's unique form of muscular Christianity and his exceedingly short temper hardened many Icelanders against the new religion, even as others found his message appealing. At a meeting of the Alþingi, Iceland's main judicial assembly, in 998 each side blasphemed the others' gods. One of the Christian converts, Hjalti Skeggjason, proclaimed a short ditty that might have a claim to be called the earliest Christian poem to be composed in Iceland, even though it is not so much Christian as anti-pagan:

> I don't wish to bark at the gods, but it seems to me that Freyja's a bitch.[12]

For this remark Hjalti was prosecuted for blasphemy against the pagan gods and sentenced to outlawry, during which time he sought King Óláfr's protection in Norway. The idea that the old gods should be protected under Icelandic law in this way seems strange, and possibly reflects a later author's attitudes towards blasphemy as it was understood by Christians being projected onto the pagan past, since there is no evidence that any other case of 'blasphemy' was ever prosecuted. (The earliest surviving Icelandic law-code, *Grágás* [c. 1119], does not preserve any of the older laws related to religious behaviour that might have been in force prior to the conversion.) Whether or not people at the time would really have regarded it as blasphemous, Hjalti's poem scorning Freyja does provide an important example of the power that poetry still held in the incipient religious conflict in Iceland. Perhaps if he had simply stated the same opinion in conversation, his opponents would not have found it so objectionable (or so memorable).

Skaldic poetry was still a privileged communicative medium, and remained an important cultural marker. On both sides of the religious divide poetry got men into the most trouble during Iceland's national debate. Hjalti's verse is successful because it uses traditional diction and mythological referents, but turns their usual meaning on its head; it uses the power of poetry to assert the powerlessness of the religious-cultural system that underlies it. At the same time, his insult confirms that he still thought of the pagan gods as real: he does not claim that Freyja does not exist – if she did not, his slander would not count as blasphemy. The Christian God has not yet driven out the Æsir from the Icelanders' imagination; rather, Christianity has begun to transform people's attitudes towards the old gods, who still remained central to their worldview. Hjalti views them as a negative force, which can be contrasted with Christianity's positive message. For other pagans, the reverse was true: they could acknowledge God as a powerful supernatural being while still regarding their traditional deities as superior to him.

When King Óláfr learned about the intransigence of the pagans in the wake of Hjalti's outlawry, he became very angry and had all the Icelanders who were in Norway imprisoned and threatened them with death or maiming: Óláfr and Þangbrandr were fellow travellers when it came to robust conversion techniques. Hjalti and another of the Christian Icelanders, Gizurr the White, persuaded the king that they would be able to change their countrymen's mind, if he permitted them to go home; they argued that Þangbrandr had only himself to blame for the failure of his mission, as Icelanders were understandably liable to take badly to a foreigner arriving on the island and killing their countrymen.

In the summer of 999 – Iceland's conversion is traditionally dated to the year 1000, although this is probably an error – Gizurr and Hjalti returned home to a situation that threatened to spill over into violence. By now, pagans and Christians had split into distinct, armed camps, and a fight seemed to be brewing. Ari Þorgilsson's twelfth-century history of early Iceland, *Íslendingabók*, provides the most reliable account of this tense period. Ari describes the build-up to that year's Alþingi, where 'the heathens thronged together fully armed, and it came so close to fighting that no one could foresee which way it would go'. After Gizurr and Hjalti had spoken persuasively in favour of the new religion, the time came to commit to one side or another. Christians and pagans declared that each group needed its own laws, and refused to abide by the other's. The law-speaker at the time,

one Þorgeirr, was a pagan, but the Christians nevertheless asked him to declare the law for Christians – in Saga-Age Iceland, the law had arguably a more significant place in society than religion did, and the Christians seem to have been motivated by a desire that the prestige and validity of the legal system be maintained. In a famous passage, Ari describes Þorgeirr lying down to rest, covering his head with his cloak, and staying in that position for a full day and a night. It is unclear what significance we should attach to this 'ceremony', but it seems to have done the trick; next morning, Þorgeirr delivered his verdict, and set the seal on Iceland's future as a Christian nation:

> He began his speech, and said that he thought that people's affairs had come to a bad pass, if they were not all to have the same law in this country, and tried to persuade them in many ways that they should not let this happen, and said it would give rise to such discord that it was certainly to be expected that fights would take place between people by which the land would be laid waste . . . 'And now it seems most advisable to me,' he said, 'that we too do not let those who most wish to oppose each other prevail, and let us arbitrate between them, so that each side has its own way in something, and let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace.'[13]

In his speech, Þorgeirr appealed to his countrymen's respect for the law, urging them to place social stability above adherence to one religion or the other. He reminded his audience of the long-standing situation in Norway and Denmark, in which constant violence between Christian rulers and their pagan opponents had lasted 'until the people of those countries had made peace between them, even though [the kings] did not wish it'. Kingless Iceland had a historic opportunity to reveal itself as more rational and civilized than the old monarchies of Scandinavia, which had almost torn themselves apart over their religious differences. In the second half of the eleventh century, Adam of Bremen wrote that the Icelanders 'had no king but the law', and the ease with which the conversion of Iceland was accomplished seems to bear out their belief that their law could govern society better than any king's rule.

Þorgeirr made both sides agree that everybody in Iceland should have the same law before declaring that the country should from then on be Christian, and that everybody should be baptized as soon as possible. In a concession to the pagan party, however, it was agreed that the eating of horse-flesh and the exposure of unwanted children – both utterly unacceptable as far as the Church was concerned – would be permitted as in the previous laws. People

could perform sacrifices in secret, but public observance of pagan rituals would be punishable by three years' outlawry. Ari concludes his description of the conversion by stating that 'a few years later, these heathen provisions were abolished, like the others'.

CONCLUSION

The striking thing about the conversion of Iceland as Ari and other writers describe it is that it is a formal and communal shift of identity and practice, accomplished for social and political reasons. Apart from Hjalti's derogatory verse about Freyja, Icelanders show no tendency towards traducing the reputations or denying the existence of the old gods. People were free to believe what they chose, and for several years after the conversion they were even permitted to observe the same religious practices that had marked them out as pagans in the first place. It is doubtful, therefore, how much the worldview of Icelanders, and the place of the pagan gods within it, changed simply because they had accepted baptism. The establishment of the Icelandic church took considerable time – the first bishop was only appointed in 1056 – and this absence of religious authority, combined with the relative geographical isolation in which families lived, may well have meant that pagan beliefs, pagan poetry and pagan stories were all more vital and long-lived in post-conversion Iceland than in Norway. Iceland was by now a Christian country; but it does not necessarily follow that it immediately became a nation of Christians.

We know little about what happened to pagan myths in Iceland in the years following the conversion. The sources which describe Iceland's gradual Christianization – principally sagas of one sort or another – are more interested in religious practice and pre-Christian folklore than in stories about the gods themselves. Relatively little genuine eleventh-century Icelandic skaldic poetry survives. Yet a little over two centuries after the conversion a remarkable renaissance in the production of both traditional poetry and mythic narrative began in Iceland. One of the most important questions that face us when we consider the place of pagan mythology in Christian Iceland is what happened to these stories during the first two centuries of Christianization. Were new mythological poems – some of those found in the

Poetic Edda, for example – composed during this period of obscurity? Or did old poems continue to circulate? If so, under what circumstances and for what purposes did people compose, perform or preserve them? We get the impression that the myths of pagan Iceland entered a state of suspended animation after the country's change of religion, lying dormant until a new generation of poets and authors brought them to life again in the thirteenth century. But it is hard to imagine how these stories would have survived if they were not in use. How did a body of tradition that ran contrary to the Church's teaching remain viable over a span of more than two hundred years? There are a number of possibilities, none of which can be proven. Perhaps pagan culture persisted much longer than pagan practice in Iceland; perhaps Icelanders found a way to incorporate stories about their old deities into a hybrid worldview that was at once pagan and Christian; perhaps the myths were stripped of their religious associations quite early on, becoming no more 'real' than legends told about heroic ancestor-figures. On the other hand, we might possibly think it plausible that secret pockets of authentic paganism persisted well beyond the conversion, and that these stories retained some or all of their religious and cultural power. Unfortunately, the sources do not provide us with a secure basis for answering any of these questions. But somehow the stories survived; and as the medium of their preservation was oral-traditional poetry, it is reasonable to assume that they remained in active circulation for much of the time before their final committal to parchment. Myths will not survive when an oral tradition dies, unless they have been recorded by some outside agency.

It is possible to discern a definite contrast between the place of myth in Icelandic and Norwegian society and culture in the years leading up to the countries' conversions to Christianity. As we have seen, there was a flowering of the mythological imagination among Norwegian poets connected with the royal courts of Norway, which produced some remarkably innovative and sophisticated mythological poetry. The impetus behind this upsurge in creativity seems to have been the threat posed by Christianity, as well as the poets' desire to bolster the authority of the self-consciously pagan Jarl Hákon. In Iceland, the process of conversion was significantly less protracted and less contentious; there was probably less interaction between pagan and Christian cultures prior to Þangbrandr's mission than there had been in Norway, and there was no firmly established religious authority to try to enforce the norms of one religion over the other or to use myth for its own

ends. Iceland also lacked a royal court, which in tenth-century Norway was the primary milieu and market for the composition of skaldic verse – a situation which talented Icelandic skalds were quick to exploit.

Myth did, of course, have a place in Icelandic pagan culture. Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* demonstrates that many mythic narratives – some of which are not attested in Norwegian poetry – were known in Iceland. Other Icelandic skalds use a sophisticated array of mythological references within their own kenning-systems, even if their compositions do not relate mythic narratives *per se*. Fewer authentic skaldic poems survive from pre-conversion Iceland than from Norway, which may give us a distorted impression of the relative importance attached to this artform. But perhaps Icelanders did not need at this stage to create entire pagan mythologies for the same religious-political reasons as the Norwegians did. If religious turmoil provides a particularly fertile ground for the production of new myths, as I have argued, perhaps Iceland's notably quick and peaceful conversion to Christianity is itself a reason for the existence of fewer poems on specifically mythological subjects in the period prior to and during Óláfr Tryggvason's reign. Whereas the golden age of Norwegian myth-making ended with Jarl Hákon's death and the triumph of King Óláfr, Iceland would only become the main centre for the production of Norse myths long after the country had become Christian.

6

The Rebirth of Norse Mythology: Denmark and Iceland, c. 1150–1350

As Christianity took hold across Scandinavia – as the national Churches became established, and the first generations of Christian kings assumed power – traditional Norse religions and the myths associated with them became officially taboo. But long after the formal conversions of Norway and Iceland had taken place, Christian preachers still felt it necessary to instruct their congregations that paganism was a delusion and the old gods false idols. It is very difficult to know whether paganism was a genuine threat to Christianity in the first two centuries after the conversion – whether people continued to worship the old gods in secret or to pass around their myths, or if Scandinavian churchmen really thought there was a danger of their flock slipping back into their old ways if they were not continually reminded of their obligation as Christians to believe only in the one true God. In Sweden, pagan religions certainly retained a central importance in many people's lives well into the Christian era – perhaps as late as the early thirteenth century – but Sweden's conversion was famously protracted and difficult. As far as the sources tell us, the situation in post-conversion Iceland and Norway should have been different. The medieval historians, Christians all, who wrote about the conversion of these two nations wished to draw a line under the pagan era as soon as the formal transition between religions had been completed. Iceland's conversion could be dated almost to a particular morning in 999; Norway's took longer, and could only be said to have been completed during the reign of St Óláfr Haraldsson (1015–28). But from then on, in the eyes of their chroniclers, both nations were Christian realms, and paganism was reduced to an occasional residual annoyance – something for a king to

suppress or a saint to defeat – rather than as a widespread, living belief system.

Even if the idea of a hidden pagan ‘underground’ in Norway or Iceland seems somewhat far-fetched beyond the end of the eleventh century, there remains the fact that poetry with a basis in pagan myth did remain in circulation during the Christian era, at least in Iceland. In Norway, where skaldic court poetry was the most important medium for myths in the late Viking Age, it is not surprising that its importance waned after the conversion. Upon gaining the throne, St Óláfr himself employed more court skalds than any other Norwegian king, before or since. His poets’ main job was to record, commemorate and praise the king’s exploits. But since Óláfr was a Christian king, they could hardly do so by recourse to aggrandizing comparisons with Odin or Thor or by imagining the king taking up a place in Valhalla. Thus, the mythological content of skaldic verse declined rapidly in the eleventh century; poets spoke about heaven and *helvíti* (the Old Norse word used to differentiate the Christian hell from its pagan namesake) rather than Valhalla and Hel. Over time, a new repertoire of Christian kennings developed to allow Christian poets to express themselves in more sophisticated – though religiously appropriate – ways. And eventually the skaldic art was applied to purely Christian subjects – devotional poetry about the Virgin Mary, and similar holy topics, replaced verse about valkyries, ravens and giants as the appropriate vehicle for the skalds’ virtuosity.

The decline in traditional poetry constructed using building blocks quarried from pagan mythological traditions was not terminal, however. Around the turn of the twelfth century, a new wave of poets began to compose verse in which mythological kenning-types began to return to skaldic verse, although they do not feature nearly as heavily as they had in the poems associated with Jarl Hákon’s court. The late Bjarne Fidjestøl calculated that more than 10 per cent of the kennings found in stanzas that can be assigned to the period from 1200–1250 can be identified as ‘mythological’ – containing unambiguous references to the names of gods, goddesses or other distinctively pagan figures. While this figure is significantly lower than the proportion of verses (30.2 per cent) that contain such kennings from the period 975–99 – when Hákon’s poets were at their most productive – it is nonetheless about the same frequency as we find in eleventh-century stanzas, and roughly twice as high as in verse from across the whole of the twelfth century.[1] This distribution of mythological kenning-types across time accords quite well

with the trends that we have already discerned: mythology was an important part of the skalds' vocabulary in the pagan period, of course, which reached its apogee among Jarl Hákon's poets. After the year 1000, poets at the courts of Christian kings understandably grew reluctant to embellish their verse with pagan motifs. As Christianity became more firmly entrenched in Scandinavia over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the mythological kenning became less and less fashionable – although it never disappeared entirely. But then, remarkably, there was a significant trend upwards in the use of mythological referents in skaldic verse in the thirteenth century. This period also saw an upsurge in the composition of court poetry in general – more surviving stanzas were composed for the Norwegian kings and earls in the period 1200–75 than in the whole of the eleventh century. The thirteenth century, not coincidentally, was also the period when the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* were written down, and when Snorri composed his great prose treatments of Norse myth in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that there was a re-awakening of interest in pagan myth at the beginning of the thirteenth century – a mythological renaissance. But there are signs that even before 1200 poets sometimes felt able to return to traditional material and techniques in their verse. A particularly dramatic example of this tendency is provided by a sequence of stanzas that Snorri attributed to Einarr Skúlason, the most prolific court poet of the twelfth century, who served several Norwegian monarchs – King Sigurðr Jórsalafari ('the crusader'), Haraldr Magnússon, Magnús blindi ('the blind'), the three Haraldssons, who reigned jointly, and Eysteinn II Haraldsson in particular – over more than three decades (c. 1114–60). Einarr's patrons were all Christians, and Einarr was probably himself in holy orders – he is named in a list of priests in the west of Iceland in 1141. Einarr's religious sensibilities are also expressed clearly in much of his verse, and particularly in his great poem *Geisli* ('Sun-Beam'), a remarkably subtle and sophisticated work that compares the patron saint of Norway, Óláfr, to Christ. It is one of the earliest long skaldic poems on a Christian subject to have survived. Einarr conformed to a new paradigm for an Icelandic court poet: he still made a living praising the kings of Norway, but he was as staunchly a Christian as his tenth-century predecessors had been pagan, and his poetry reflects a new religious and poetic culture: most of the time, at least. In fact, one of Einarr's compositions is possibly the most 'pagan' of all twelfth-century skaldic poetry, and a possible forerunner of the thirteenth-

century ‘renaissance’.

There are ten stanzas by Einarr in *Skáldskaparmál* that seem to have been composed in gratitude for the gift of an axe. We do not know which of Einarr’s patrons gave him this axe, or indeed if the gift was ever really given. It is possible that the (so-called) *Øxarflokkr* (‘Axe-Poem’) was never intended for delivery at court, but was a sort of private exercise in poetic technique.

Einarr’s *Øxaflokkr* verses are exceptionally difficult, even by the formidable standards of skaldic verse. Their opacity frequently arises from the poet’s use of mythological kennings. It is tempting to suggest that Einarr found their composition difficult because he was unfamiliar with this type of poetry: none of his praise-poetry or his eulogy of St Óláfr contains anything like the kennings that confront us in *Øxarflokkr*. Curiously, Freyja – goddess of love and fertility – provides the main mythological frame of reference for this poem about a weapon, especially in the first five stanzas, which Snorri quotes consecutively, attempting to explain Einarr’s kenning in each case:

> With Mardöll’s [Freyja’s] weeping [gold] lying between the grooves [on the axe] we carry the damager of Gautr’s [Odin’s] mighty gate [shield], bulging with the valley-trout’s [serpent’s] lair [gold].
>
> The strong ice of Róði’s roof [shield, its ‘ice’ is presumably the axe] is not the worse for Óðr’s bedfellow’s [Freyja’s] eye-rain [tears>gold]. With such actions, may the king reach old age.
>
> I am also able to possess Horn’s [Freyja’s] gold-wrapped glorious child [Hnoss; the noun *hnoss* means treasure]. We received a valuable treasure. Ocean’s fire [gold] rests on shield’s danger [axe]. Freyr’s niece [Hnoss] bears her mother’s eyelash-rain [tears>gold]. Battle-swan’s [raven’s] feeder [warrior] granted me Fróði’s servants’ seed [gold].
>
> The ruler’s helpful protection was all offered to me. This was close to the sea-hall. I praise highly this child of Njörðr’s daughter [Hnoss].
>
> The battle-gallant urger [warrior] of Váfuðr’s [Odin’s] assembly [battle], who achieves doughtiness, gave me a mighty Van-bride’s [Freyja’s] daughter [Hnoss]. The powerful controller [king] of sword-meetings [battles] led Gefn’s [Freyja’s] maid [Hnoss] to the poet’s bed, covered with Gautrek’s swans’ road [sea]-embers [fire>gold].[2]

The convoluted diction and frequent references to rather obscure mythological knowledge in these stanzas would not have looked out of place in Viking-Age poetry. They are rather startling, however, if they really come from the lips of the poet of *Geisli*: a priest, no less.

Einarr makes use of several unique kennings to refer to Freyja: the frequent reference to her daughter, Hnoss, is perhaps the most notable of these. *Hnoss* is found as a simple noun meaning ‘treasure’, particularly when applied to female adornment, in skaldic poetry and in some of the heroic or legendary poems of the *Poetic Edda*. But only in *Øxaflokkr* is the origin of this word given a mythological interpretation. Snorri picks up on Einarr’s kennings in *Gylfaginning*, where he notes that ‘Hnoss is the name of [Freyja and Óðr’s] daughter. She is so beautiful that from her name everything that is beautiful and precious is called *hnossir* [treasures]’.[3] It is possible that Snorri’s interpretation of Hnoss’s name is based solely on his understanding of Einarr’s use of it – this mythological figure appears in nothing that we might call a myth, and no other skalds allude to her (even though precious objects were a perennially popular subject in this type of poetry). Yet Einarr clearly refers to Hnoss as a female figure, and her relationships – she is Freyja’s daughter, Freyr’s niece, Njörðr’s granddaughter – are fixed in his mind. Einarr’s use of the alternative name Mardöll for Freyja is similarly unusual: it does not appear anywhere outside the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* with this meaning. Einarr also shows his familiarity with more common myths relating to Freyja – most notably the idea that she wept golden tears. Snorri explains this kenning as referring to a story (unknown to us) about Freyja weeping when her husband Óðr went off on his travels: the Icelandic poet Skúli Þorsteinsson had used a similar phrase in an eleventh-century composition about Óláfr Tryggvason’s final battle. Einarr also knows different names for Odin (Gautr and Váfuðr) and Odin’s connections with the semantic field of ‘battle’, as well as several variations on the traditional kenning-types for gold as ‘fire of the sea’ or ‘Fróði’s seed’. These gold-kennings are not strictly speaking mythological, although their ultimate origins do lie in traditional narratives with mythological connections. But since they do not refer to any of the pagan gods, Christian skalds felt permitted to continue to use this type of phrase when properly mythological kennings had been phased out of their vocabulary.

It is very difficult to assess the significance of Einarr’s *Øxaflokkr* and the seemingly abstruse mythological references that it contains. If these stanzas really were composed by an Icelandic priest in the mid twelfth century, the possibility confronts us that traditional pagan poetry and its underlying myths never disappeared at all. Indeed, Einarr seems to have known stories about Freyja that other, older poetry lacks. While we might imagine that inherited

traditions might have kept alive knowledge of the pagan myths at a superficial or general level, these verses imply detailed, specific knowledge of some very obscure material. The question of how a Christian like Einarr would have access to such material, or why he would want to use it, is one that we can hardly hope to answer. Most scholars agree, however, that *Øxaflokkr*, if it is indeed by the author of *Geisli* and the other poems attributed to Einarr, is a backward-looking exercise in traditional compositional techniques. In other words, Einarr would have known that he was composing verse that was by now antiquated, using kennings that imitated the forms used by skalds in the pagan heyday of court poetry. This hypothesis does not explain where he obtained the information needed to create his kennings for Freyja – and it does not discount the possibility that he invented them himself – but it may explain why he felt able to compose this type of verse: his distance from actual pagan traditions may have allowed him the freedom to approach traditional poetry as a disinterested observer, one who could separate its form from its content. Perhaps pagan poetry no longer had sufficient power or relevance for its mythological content to count as an affront to Christian sensibilities. And as a connoisseur of skaldic poetry – Einarr was a notable stylist, regardless of the subject of his verse – he would be aware that his predecessors in the art had much to teach him about composition. Mythological poetry could now be appreciated for aesthetic reasons because its religious burden no longer posed a threat to Christian audiences.

If Einarr's use of mythological kennings in *Øxarflokkr* indicates a new interest in composing skaldic poetry in the pagan idiom as an antiquarian exercise, he was not alone in this interest. As Scandinavian historians began to write their accounts of the region's earliest periods, they recognized the importance of skaldic verse as a historical source, which gave them relatively direct, though limited, access to the events of the pre-Christian period. It could be used to authenticate the information that they had from other sources, since people were aware that this type of poetry was very old, and had often been preserved in its original form. But poetry could also lend historical writing an *air* of verisimilitude, which certainly led some authors to compose or import new poetry to suggest the authority of their narratives, even when they knew that it had no actual connection to the period they were describing. A good example of this tendency is *Krákumál* ('Crow-Poem'), sometimes called the 'Death-Song of Ragnarr loðbrók'. This relatively long

poem is dated to the twelfth century, although it only exists in later manuscripts of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. *Krákumál* is composed in the traditional *dróttkvætt* meter, although it is not the most accurate or intricate example of the form. It is, however, full of allusions to pagan culture. As the great hero and semi-legendary king, Ragnarr, faces his death in a (rather implausible) Northumbrian snake-pit, his last words are supposedly recorded by the poem. Ragnarr is every inch the pagan Viking hero, looking forward to an afterlife with Odin (even though he has not died in battle):

> We struck with a sword. It gladdens me always that I know [there to be] benches for banquets prepared at Baldr's father's [Odin's]; let us at once drink beer out of the curved branches of skulls [horns]; a champion does not wail against death at dear Fjölnir's [Odin's] dwellings; I do not come to Viðrir's [Odin's] hall with words of fear.
>
> I am eager to venture there, the dísir bid me home, those whom Odin has sent to me from the Lord of Hosts' [Odin's] hall; I will drink ale with the Æsir gladly in the high-seat; life's expectations are passed, I'll die laughing.[4]

The *Krákumál*-poet clearly knew the Valhalla myth-complex in its general outlines, and was aware of some alternative names for Odin. Like Einarr's poem, however, we should see these verses as a backward-looking re-imagining of pagan attitudes rather than imputing any sort of active pagan belief to their author. It is possible that the Viking stereotypes that *Krákumál* builds upon were already seen as being far-fetched, unhistorical and perhaps even comic: Ragnarr's stoicism in the face of a thousand venomous snake bites is laudable and heroic, but his determination to 'die laughing' in the face of it seems to be an exaggerated, knowing exposition of Viking *braggadocio*.

This type of twelfth-century poetry does reveal that mythological knowledge had been preserved and continued to circulate. But it also shows us that poets now could make use of mythological material only in specific contexts – basically, its use was restricted to self-consciously retrospective poetry, poetry which set out deliberately to imitate the style and content of much older poetry or which purported to be much older than it really was. The tradition may still have been alive, but it could only be applied to dead subjects. Neither Einarr nor the *Krákumál*-poet tells stories about the old gods themselves; they are not yet minded or able to use their poetry as a vehicle for myth. There is no evidence that the pagan deities had any reality for these poets, though they knew that other people had formerly believed in

them. Paganism was already being viewed as a historical phenomenon – one which had a lasting cultural interest but which contained no religious validity. Myth had become both a thing of the past and the stuff of legend.

MYTH AND HISTORY IN SAXO AND SNORRI

Although the mythological renaissance that seems to have begun in the second half of the twelfth century flowered especially in Iceland, the first author to attempt to turn traditional stories about the Scandinavian gods into a cohesive sequence of prose narratives was in fact Danish. Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150–1220) could hardly have been further removed from the world of Norse paganism. He was employed, probably as some sort of clerk, by Absalon, the bishop of Roskilde (1158–92) and archbishop of Lund (1178–1201), who encouraged him to write a history of Denmark. Saxo was thus not merely a Christian, but an employee of the Church; and Denmark had been a Christian nation for about two hundred years when he began work on his great *History of the Kings and Heroes of the Danes*. He was well educated in the classical tradition and had read the works of Christian historians like Bede and Dudo of St Quentin. Like these authors, Saxo wrote in Latin. His history is predominantly written in prose, although it includes a substantial amount of original poetry, also in Latin. Saxo seems to be a world away from the Norse-Icelandic skalds of the pagan period. Yet his history contains several stories that not only feature characters who are clearly identical with the Norse gods, but which in several cases are thought to be versions of much older myths. Saxo is the first example in Scandinavia of a new breed of thinker and writer on the subject of the old gods: he uses stories drawn from pagan traditions, but because of his own utterly different religious and cultural position, and his viewpoint as an observer external to the cultural system that produced these myths, he recasts them in new ways, according to his own theories. In the process, Saxo transforms myth into a different kind of story. For him, a myth is not just an old story about the gods that people worshipped in the past; it is a story that tells us about the past itself. What we call myth is for Saxo not simply a historical phenomenon; it is a historical source.

Naturally, many of the stories that Saxo tells in the first nine books of his

History – those which deal with the most distant past – would not be considered by modern historians as conforming to very strict evidentiary standards. Although Saxo tells us in his *Prologue* that he has based his account upon older texts from both Denmark and Iceland – he mentions both runic inscriptions and poetry as potential sources for the earliest periods – he never names these sources. Although he claims to have rendered some of his poetic sources faithfully into Latin, the end result of his translations are so far removed from Norse poetry as to be unrecognizable. We do not know where he gained his knowledge of 'Norse mythology', therefore: there is certainly no other evidence from Denmark that pagan narrative or poetic traditions had persisted into the twelfth century as they had, to an extent, in Iceland.

In Saxo's *History*, the gods, mythological beings and legendary heroes of Scandinavian tradition are amalgamated into the Danish royal line. The theories according to which Saxo places mythological or pseudo-historical figures into his chronology of early Denmark are aligned with euhemerism, although Saxo never uses that term. Euhemerus was an ancient Greek philosopher and mythographer whose theories about the origins of pagan deities were sufficiently influential to permeate European thought for more than a millennium, although none of his own works survive. On the basis of allusions to Euhemerus's writings in the extant works of other Greek authors it is possible to reconstruct the basic idea of classical euhemerism: simply stated, gods had originally been historical people – most often kings, great warriors, or noted wise men – whose deeds and attributes had been sufficiently splendid to attract veneration within their communities. Over time, as stories about these figures spread and became embellished, veneration turned to worship, with its concomitant trappings of ritual acts by which communities did honour to their 'gods'. Eventually, these figures were endowed with supernatural powers as a result of people accepting as true increasingly exaggerated and fantastic accounts of their exploits. According to Euhemerus, Zeus – the chief god in the ancient Greek pantheon – had started out as a historical king of Crete. This theory enjoyed considerable popularity with medieval Christian authors who wished to explain away paganism as a historical phenomenon that lacked any claim to spiritual truth.

Saxo's attitude towards the figures perceived as divine by his pagan ancestors has much in common with euhemerism. Although Saxo is not minded to condemn pagans for their folly in elevating their kings into a form of divinity, he explicitly states that the early Danes were 'deluded' into

believing that beings of extraordinary size (giants) or those with special magical abilities (who seem to be equivalent to the Æsir in Norse tradition), or a third class of 'wizards', bred from the first two races, were gods. Saxo points out that the Danes could hardly be blamed for this mistake, which was common to all pagan peoples:

> It is not surprising that the barbarians yielded to their weird hocus-pocus, since even the intelligent Romans were seduced into worshipping similar mortals with divine honours. I mention these matters so that when I write at length of portents and marvels the incredulous reader may not contest them.[5]

Saxo's agenda is clear: by identifying pagan religion as a historical delusion to which even the Romans were prey, he aligns the Danes with some of the most prestigious ancient European cultures, peoples whose paganism could not distract from their glorious achievements. For an author who was influenced to such an extent by Vergil's *Æneid* – a monument of pagan culture that had become adopted into the canon of medieval Christian learning – this attitude is unsurprising, since it allows Saxo to treat the religion of his ancestors nonjudgementally. Once he had issued this caveat in Book 1, Saxo treats pagan traditions with a neutrality that might otherwise have been impossible for a churchman. He distances himself and his audience from paganism, but he never condemns the native religion or its myths, some of which he goes on to transform into (pseudo-)historical narratives.

Of all the Norse gods, Odin occupies the most central place in Saxo's history. For Saxo, Odin was 'a man . . . who was believed throughout Europe, though falsely, to be a god'.[6] Odin lived mainly at Uppsala – an intriguing suggestion that Uppsala retained its particular resonance as a pagan site into the thirteenth century – possibly because of the 'beauty of the countryside' there. Saxo knew that Odin's wife was Frigg, whom he represents as having been sexually promiscuous – the first story he tells about Odin ends with his going into exile, partly to escape the shame Frigg's liaisons have brought upon him. On his return, Odin casts out all other mortals who feigned divinity and all soothsayers from his kingdom; this narrative is not known from other sources. Having introduced Odin to the reader, Saxo focuses on heroic legends for the substance of Books 1 and 2 of the *History*, returning to the deeds of the 'gods' in the third section of his work.

SAXO'S BALDR-MYTH

Although we have already seen scattered references to the myth of Baldr's death in poetry from the late pagan era, no full version of the story survives from before the conversion. Saxo's telling of this myth is thus the earliest text of it to have survived. It is also radically different – as we shall see – to the 'standard' version of the narrative that Snorri Sturluson produced in Iceland shortly afterwards. One of the most intriguing questions facing readers of these two works is whether their treatments of the Baldr-myth are related, whether they represent different branches of a pan-Scandinavian tradition, and to what extent they are the inventions of their Christian authors.

In Saxo's account, the hero of the narrative is not Baldr but Höðr, who in the Norse-Icelandic myths is Baldr's blind brother and eventually his killer. Saxo makes his Høtherus a mortal king, albeit a rather remarkable one. From his youth it is apparent that he is one of the most accomplished and brilliant men around: he surpasses all his contemporaries in athletic, intellectual and cultural accomplishments – he is a wonderful swimmer, as strong as any warrior and a talented musician. Saxo's portrayal of Høtherus is much more detailed than Snorri's of Höðr, where we learn very little apart from the fact that he is blind. Høtherus is certainly not blind. Nor is he Balderus's (Saxo's Latinization of Baldr's name) brother; in fact, Saxo makes the two figures enemies, who compete for the hand of Nanna, who is Baldr's loyal wife in Snorri's version of the myth. Balderus is Odin's son – one of the few details both stories share.

The narratives unfold after Balderus, inflamed with lust after seeing Nanna bathing, decides to eliminate his main rival, Høtherus. All other versions of the myth lack this motivation, and the roles of the two protagonists are reversed: Balderus is determined to murder Høtherus, whereas Höðr's slaying of Baldr is accidental manslaughter, brought about through Loki's trickery. Høtherus is warned of Balderus's evil intentions when he meets a group of 'forest maidens' who warn him not to fight Balderus, a demi-god who will defeat him in battle. These maidens are the traditional valkyries in disguise: they 'control the fortune of wars by their guidance and blessings [and] were often invisibly present on the battlefield', where they were 'able to award success or defeat at pleasure'.[7] There can be no doubt that these are the same battlefield-maidens that populate pagan poetry, but in this case they do not really exist: Saxo has them and all their surroundings disappear, almost in a puff of smoke, leaving Høtherus to wonder at 'the rapid disappearance of the maidens, the false illusion of their home and the change of scenery'.[8] We

shall see shortly that Snorri Sturluson disorients the protagonist of *Gylfaginning* with a remarkably similar illusion.

After Nanna's father refuses Høtherus's proposal of marriage for fear of upsetting Balderus, who is seemingly invulnerable to ordinary weapons, Høtherus embarks on his first quest, to fetch a magic sword and a bracelet that provides unlimited wealth to its owner from the 'wood-satyr' Mimingus. The name Mimingus may be taken from Norse tradition – in *Þiðreks saga*, the legendary smith, Velent (also known as Völundr or Weland), forges a wonderful sword called Mimungr. The magical bracelet, meanwhile, recalls the ring Draupnir, which (according to Snorri) Odin placed on Baldr's pyre to burn alongside his son. Draupnir had the remarkable characteristic that every ninth night another eight rings of similar weight would drip from it, supplying an eternal abundance of gold. It seems likely that Saxo has based both these objects upon their mythological antecedents in the Norse tradition. The detail that Balderus cannot be harmed by weapons similarly anticipates Snorri's famous story of the Æsir flinging all sorts of missiles at the doomed god, doing him no harm before Höðr unleashes the fateful mistletoe at him.

Saxo includes several episodes that are extraneous to the main Baldr-myth: the journey to Mimingus's dwelling is followed by an account of a battle between the armies of Høtherus and Gelderus, the king of Saxony, in which the Scandinavians' mastery of the Roman-style 'shield-tortoise' formation wins them the victory. Balderus's courtship of Nanna is described – the maiden rejects him on the grounds that a union between a god and a mortal would be impossible, a theme that Saxo elaborates, stating that 'there was no link between mundane and divine, since a quite different origin and nature put a deep chasm between them; a vast difference lay between the shining majesty of the gods and the human condition'.[9] When Balderus and Høtherus finally come to fight, Saxo makes it into a struggle between gods and humans: their first battle takes place at sea, and Thor and 'battalions of other deities' join Odin in supporting Balderus. Thor, armed with a club, threatens to carry the day for the gods before Høtherus manages to chop through Thor's weapon, at which point the gods all flee. As in many of the other myths about Thor, his club (or hammer) is the physical embodiment of his strength, and without it he is unable to perform his function as the Æsir's protector. Saxo concludes this episode by stating:

> That the gods were overcome by men might strain belief, but ancient report testifies it. We say 'gods' more from supposition than truth, and give them the title of 'deities' by

popular custom, not through their nature.[10]

With the ‘gods’ defeated, Høtherus is able to ask for Nanna’s hand once more, and this time he is successful; the two of them return to Sweden, where he was revered for his victory over Balderus. But when the two heroes next meet in battle, it is the demi-god who emerges victorious, although Balderus counts his victory as hollow since he still has not obtained Nanna, who begins to haunt his dreams. Baldr’s dreaming is an important part of the story of his death in Snorri’s version and in the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar*, but the dreams themselves are utterly different, when Saxo mentions them: in the Norse sources, Baldr is troubled by omens about his death, rather than by frustrated love for a woman.

Høtherus conquers Denmark; then Balderus conquers it in turn. At this point, the conflict between the two figures seems to have forgotten its original motivation, as each vies to rest control of the kingdom from the other – Saxo clearly sides with Høtherus, whose claim to the throne he believes to be valid on the basis of his ancestry. Twice more they fight, and Balderus wins inconclusive victories at both battles. Høtherus flees to the wilderness, until he meets another group of prophetic maidens, who advise him that Balderus relies upon a special foodstuff to preserve his superhuman strength; if Høtherus can take that away from him, he will win in the end. So Høtherus sneaks into the enemy’s camp and steals Balderus’s food; when they resume fighting the next day, Høtherus stabs Odin’s half-human son in the side, and three days later – after a visit from the ‘goddess of death’, who may or may not be equivalent to the Norse Hel – Balderus dies. He is buried in a mound, and not burned on a pyre.

In contrast to the picture that the Icelandic sources draw of Baldr and his unfortunate brother Höðr, Saxo’s version makes Balderus the villain of the piece. Traditionally, Baldr was viewed as a largely passive and entirely blameless victim, who paid with his life for the gods’ complacency and Loki’s mischief. But Saxo makes his Balderus into an aggressive and covetous anti-hero, who seeks to use his semi-divine power to force Nanna into an unwanted sexual relationship. In Snorri’s version, on the other hand, Nanna is so devoted to Baldr that she throws herself onto his blazing pyre, refusing to go on living without him. Loki is also absent from Saxo’s account of the myth. The only figure who plays an analogous role in both narratives is Odin, although he also performs deeds that are not recorded in the Icelandic

versions.

Odin's relationship with Baldr is the same in both versions: he is his father, although in Saxo Balderus is given a mortal mother. Odin's main function is to make sure that his son's death is avenged. According to *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda*, Odin begets a son called Váli, who immediately kills Höðr, before he has even been alive for a full day. The process of vengeance is more complicated in Saxo's story. It begins with Odin's seeking supernatural advice about how to avenge Balderus:

> Now although Odin was regarded as chief of the gods, he would constantly approach seers, soothsayers and others whom he had discovered strong in the finest arts of prediction, with a view to prosecuting vengeance for his son. Divinity is not always so perfect that it can dispense with human aid.[11]

This description recalls Odin's long-standing quest for knowledge about future events, which is attested in most of the myths that centre on him. But where the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar* has Odin trying to find out how to prevent Baldr's death by conducting a séance with a dead *völva* ('prophetess'), in Saxo's version the god only involves himself in these events after Balderus has been slain. Here, Odin approaches a Finnish sorcerer – their neighbours in the medieval north generally regarded the Finns as having special magical powers – who tells him that he must have a son by a princess named Rinda, and that this son will avenge Balderus's death.

Going about in disguise – another characteristic of Odin that is common to literary traditions across Scandinavia – he ingratiates himself with Rinda's father by helping him gain a victory over his enemies. But Rinda is not impressed by Odin's worthiness in battle; she rebuffs him when he tries to kiss her. Odin adopts a fresh disguise and demonstrates his skills in metalwork, producing the finest jewellery that had ever been seen in those parts. But his gift of a marvellous bracelet to Rinda wins him only a slap about the ear. She declares to her father that the idea of sex with Odin, who cannot disguise his great age, disgusts her. So Odin tries one more time, showing off his skills and courage on the battlefield once more, having taken care to alter his appearance with rejuvenating magic. But on the third occasion – the triple repetition of the scene recalls the composition of folk-tales – he fares no better. Rinda knocks Odin to the ground when he tries to steal a kiss. More direct action is needed, and Odin bewitches her so that she appears mad. Odin's final disguise is female dress: he returns to the king's

castle and claims to be a (woman) doctor, which gains him admittance to the princess's quarters where for a while he acts in disguise as her attendant. Rinda falls sick, and Odin declares that he knows the only cure: a certain medicine that would taste so bitter that Rinda would only be able to bear it if she was tied down. Unsurprisingly, Odin has an ulterior motive and he takes advantage of Rinda's illness and her position of utter vulnerability, raping her and making her pregnant with the child who would become Bous, Balderus's eventual avenger.

In an interesting twist to the plot, Odin is actually banished by the gods when they hear of his shameful treatment of Rinda:

> Now the gods, whose principal residence was reckoned to be at Byzantium, perceived that Odin had tarnished the honour of his divinity by these various lapses from dignity and decided that he should quit their fraternity . . . Now that the ludicrous behaviour of a high deity had become common knowledge, they were aware that those who had been seduced into paying them worship and adoration were exchanging reverence for contempt and growing ashamed of their piety. Sacred rites were considered profane, established ritual nonsense. They saw doom ahead, fear was in their hearts and you would have imagined that the misdemeanours of a single member were recoiling on all their heads.[12]

There is something comic in the idea of the Norse gods – as we know them from other sources, at least – trying to take the moral high ground over one of their number. But Saxo represents them as gods whose divinity is entirely contingent on the continued worship of the people they have duped into accepting them as such. When Odin brings their name into disrepute, their stock falls as a religious force, and pagans begin to turn away from their worship in droves. By driving their chief into exile, they aim to be seen putting their house in order. In fact, Odin bribes his way back into the gods' company ten years later, by which time his son Bous is just old enough to take on Høtherus and win. He does so, dying in the process; Saxo's strange and exceptional version of the Baldr-myth is completed.

The third book of Saxo's *History* contains his only retelling of a full myth that is known from the Norse tradition, although the gods do appear sporadically in the rest of Books 1–9. Saxo's story about Balderus, Høtherus and Odin's quest for revenge is therefore unique: it is the only example of a true Norse myth preserved in Latin; it is clearly related to other extant versions of the myth, but we have no access to the sources from which Saxo obtained his narrative. Accordingly, we have no way of knowing to what extent this version represents part of an older, inherited tradition that may

have circulated in Denmark – in poetry, or perhaps as an orally transmitted story, if not in an earlier prose version that has since become lost – and how much of his story is simply Saxo's own invention. Although it conforms in several details to the classic version of the Baldr-myth – its protagonists are the same, and the idea that Odin will sire a new son to kill Höðr/Høtherus is common to both; Odin displays many of his traditional characteristics in this story – the differences between the two narratives are more striking than their similarities. The motivation for Høtherus's slaying of Balderus is completely different; Balderus is presented in a negative light; Loki is not involved in driving the plot forward; and the killing of Balderus has no significant effect upon the gods, whereas in *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda* this event precipitates Ragnarök. There is perhaps a hint of a similar idea in Saxo's account when he states that the gods 'saw doom ahead' and felt fearful after Odin's shameful rape of Rinda. But the world does not end suddenly for Saxo's pagan gods; rather, they fade from view over time, as his narrative gradually moves into better-attested historical periods. For the most significant departure that Saxo makes from the Norse tradition is the idea that these are not real gods at all, but people who are subject to the same laws of time as the rest of us; they do not exist outside human space-time as they do in *Völuspá*, for example, where the world of the *Æ*sir must be completely destroyed before a new phase of history can begin. Saxo was a historian, not a mythographer or theologian – it is notable that although he treats paganism as a delusion, he sees it as part of a historical process rather than as a stage in a people's spiritual development. We will never know how faithful Saxo was to his mythological sources, unless by some chance we discover what those sources were; it is impossible to say, for example, whether the tradition of Höðr slaying Baldr with a sword (rather than with the mistletoe) is an ancient motif or a brand new development. But we can see quite clearly how Saxo's attitude to the pagan gods in general is a function of his educated outlook on the history of the world and his familiarity with classical literature, both of which are part of his design – never quite stated explicitly – to elevate Danish pagan heroes to the same exalted status as their Roman counterparts enjoyed. Saxo therefore provides us with the first example of how educated authors during this 'renaissance' of interest in pagan antiquity reassessed, reinterpreted, and recast older traditions in the pursuit of a fuller understanding of their nations' histories; but they did so with the eyes of scholarship, not belief.

THE AUTHORIZED VERSION: SNORRI STURLUSON'S *EDDA*

Norse paganism, like most primary (or 'indigenous') religions, possessed no bible, no codified dogma, and no authoritative single version of the stories that were told about its gods. Today, however, *Snorra Edda* has almost attained the status of a holy book, so influential has it been upon our understanding of Norse pagan mythology. We have already seen time and again how it is necessary to refer to Snorri in order to understand the mythological content of older poetry and how much of that poetry would have been lost had Snorri not saved it for posterity by quoting it in his work. Snorri's versions of the individual myths and his systematic presentation of the whole mythology are so clear and readable, and his attitude towards pagan religion so non-judgemental, that we are often inclined to take the *Edda* at face value as a record of the myths of the pagan north as they were actually used in the pagan north. 'If Snorri says it, it must be true' has frequently been the attitude of modern readers towards his version of the mythology. But we must be wary of letting Snorri's account seduce us into thinking it is a simple record of the stories his pagan ancestors told about the gods, for nothing could be further than the truth. *Snorra Edda* is just as much a product of its time and its author's post-pagan worldview as Saxo's work was of his. And Snorri and Saxo, for all the differences between them and their books, were contemporaries who were both equally part of this learned mythological renaissance.

Snorri's attitude towards the stories that he sets down is in fact ambiguous and his treatment of them subtle and loaded with meaning. Scholars have argued about what this meaning is, however; there is still no consensus about what *Snorra Edda* was *for*, beyond the simple fact that it clearly displays a great deal of interest in traditional forms of Old Norse poetry. An examination of one or two of the strategies Snorri used may help to shed some light on the question.

NORSE PAGANISM IN CHRISTIAN UNIVERSAL HISTORY

The *Edda* begins – in all four of its medieval manuscript versions, which

otherwise often disagree with each other in significant ways – with a *Prologue* that is clearly the work of an author who is both well-educated (by the standards of thirteenth-century Iceland) and undoubtedly a Christian. Some critics, in fact, have argued that the Christian agenda of the *Prologue* is so obvious that it cannot possibly have been written by the same person who composed the myths of *Gylfaginning*, which seem so authentic and true-to-life, and which never pass judgement upon the veracity or validity of the information they contain. But since we know so little about the origins of the text as a whole, and since the *Prologue* has been attached to the rest of the *Edda* for its entire observable history, it must logically be seen as integral to the manuscripts and thus integral to our consideration of Snorri's work.

In some respects, the *Prologue* to the *Edda* resembles Saxo's *History*, in that it uses a euhemeristic ploy to explain the origins of the gods. Snorri's *Æ*sir were originally great chieftains in Asia – more specifically in ancient Troy, not too far away from Saxo's choice of Byzantium – but became deified by popular consent. As these *Æ*sir travel northwards through Europe, 'great glory was spoken of them, so that they seemed more like gods than men'.[13] Snorri explores this idea in more detail in *Ynglinga saga*, as we have seen, in which the gods are human rulers of Sweden who trick their followers into believing that they have divine powers. Like Saxo, Snorri's attitude towards the *Æ*sir seems basically euhemeristic and is aimed towards placing the Scandinavian gods in a wider European tradition by connecting them to another group of pagans who were validated by their place in classical culture – in this case the heroes of the Trojan war, about which Snorri had probably learned from a version of the Old Norse *Trójumanna saga*. This connection has a transformative effect upon the mythological content of the *Prologue*, since it prompted Snorri to place Thor at the head of the gods' dynasty. Even though Odin occupies his expected place in *Gylfaginning*, Thor is given pride of place here because his name – especially when spelled 'Tror', which Snorri claimed was its original, 'Asian' spelling – resembles the word 'Troy' (*Trója* in Old Norse). By the same dubious phonetic reasoning, Snorri derives the name '*Æ*sir' from the gods' alleged homeland in Asia.

There is one major difference between Snorri and Saxo in their treatment of the gods' historical origins, however, in that Snorri places them within an explicitly Christian frame of reference. The *Prologue* begins in an obviously – and self-consciously – biblical style:

> Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things in them, and lastly two humans from whom generations are descended, Adam and Eve, and their stock multiplied and spread over all the world. But as time passed mankind became diverse: some were good and orthodox in faith, but many more turned aside to follow the lusts of the world and neglected God's commandments, and so God drowned the world in a flood together with all creatures in the flood except those who were in the ark with Noah.[14]

Snorri goes on to describe that even after God had demonstrated his displeasure with those who had ignored his commandments people refused to be obedient to him, and eventually forgot his name. Lacking knowledge of Christian truth, these proto-pagans could only try to make sense of the world using the skills of observation and rational deduction that God had given, unbeknownst to them. Eventually, pagan people came to think first that the earth was alive – the principle of animism – and then that there must be some sort of higher power that governed the laws of nature that they gradually began to observe. All this reasoning, which brought pagan people to the idea of the existence of divinity, was accomplished through rational deduction. They came to the wrong answer, because living as they did before Christ's mission on earth, they had not been reminded of the true God's identity; but they are not to be blamed, since they did the best they could with the information available to them. Paganism may have been a mistake, but it was not a particularly blameworthy one, or so Snorri says. This attitude calls to mind Saxo's reminder that many peoples – even the Romans – have endured a period of pagan darkness, and that this does not in itself render their accomplishments null. For Snorri, who wished to celebrate the achievements of pagan Norse poets and who seems to have wanted to promote traditional poetry as a living artform, this conclusion is an important one: it allows him to see paganism as something that would be inexcusable in him or his contemporaries, but which can – indeed should – be excused in his ancestors.

The *Prologue* to *Snorra Edda*, then, treats paganism as a historical phenomenon, but its notion of history is rather different to Saxo's, in that it is structured around the *religious* development of cultures. It places paganism within a wider, explicitly Christian, notion of universal history that has many correspondences with contemporary historical theory, although it has never been established whether Snorri had read Latin historians or the works of earlier Christian commentators on paganism. Whatever the *Prologue*'s sources, its function seems clear: it gives the reader a context within which to read the myths that follow in *Gylfaginning* with a suitable degree of detachment. The religious culture that gave rise to the Norse myths existed at

a particular time and for particular reasons; but the cultural and historical conditions that produced pagan beliefs no longer pertained in Iceland at the time Snorri was writing. Pagan myths could be appreciated by a Christian audience, but only if they viewed them in the terms set out in the *Prologue*, as Snorri reminds us in his 'advice to young poets' at the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*. There, as we have seen, he addresses his readers directly, stating once again – and quite forcefully – that we must *only* read these 'old stories' in the light of his explanation 'at the start of this book' (by which he surely means to refer to the *Prologue*) of how belief in the pagan gods grew out of the mistaken idea that the heroes of Troy were superhuman and possessed the ability to make the world bend to their will – power which in fact only God possesses.

A NEW MYTH OF PAGAN MYTHOLOGY: SNORRI'S *GYLFAGINNING*

The *Prologue* provides a distancing framework for the *Edda* that should ensure that its readers are not lured into the error of mistaking the mythic narratives it contains for any sort of religious truth. But Snorri does not simply move on to tell us the myths and let us make our own minds up about them. The construction of the second part of the *Edda*, *Gylfaginning*, is very carefully wrought in order to reinforce the *Prologue*'s warning against believing in these stories. It contains a second elaborate framing device – this time narrative rather than expository – which reveals the untruths that underlie pagan mythology. Then, although many of *Gylfaginning*'s myths are simply straightforward retellings of stories known to Snorri from eddic poetry, we find occasions where he intervenes in the myths themselves. Snorri never sets out this agenda for *Gylfaginning* in so many words, but it is not difficult to read between the lines. In this and the following section, I shall attempt to show how Snorri tried to create a new mythology based partly upon inherited narrative traditions, and partly on contemporary Christian knowledge and attitudes. This part of the *Edda* works together with the *Prologue* to produce what we might call a 'meta-myth' about the Norse gods: a new myth that *appears* to represent pagan mythology but which in fact draws upon a great wealth of material from different traditions, as well as the author's own imagination, to produce a version of the mythology that was suitable for contemporary, Christian audiences.

Gylfaginning's frame narrative tells of a pseudo-historical king of Sweden, Gylfi, who is also mentioned in the *Prologue*. Gylfi is tricked into giving up part of his realm to Gefjon, a female member of the Æsir: in return for her sexual favours, Gylfi promises her as much land as she can plough in a single day and night. At this point in the story the Æsir are still the remarkable men and women of Asia who have moved to Scandinavia, cheered on all the way by the admiring populations who gradually came to view the Æsir as gods. The title *Gylfaginning* means 'Gylfi's tricking' or 'delusion', and Gefjon's deceit in carving up Sweden with the help of four oxen from the mythical land of the giants is just the first of many tricks in this part of the *Edda*. Gylfi decides to go and investigate the mysterious Æsir, one of whose number tricked him so easily, in an attempt to find out – in effect – whether they are gods or men. The Æsir are aware of his coming, and prepare disorienting 'optical illusions' for him as he enters their castle at Ásgarðr. The significance of these illusions does not become clear until the very end of *Gylfaginning*.

The bulk of *Gylfaginning* takes the form of a dialogue between Gylfi – who is in disguise and calls himself Gangleri – and three representatives of the Æsir, who go by the names Hár ('High'), Jafnhár ('Just-as-high') and Þriði ('Third'); in all likelihood, these figures are different identities of Odin, whose division into three may reflect the Christian conception of the Holy Trinity. Gylfi asks them questions about their beliefs, their gods, and the mythological universe, and the three figures respond in turn. This question and answer structure recalls the form of eddic wisdom poems like *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, in both of which Odin enters into a contest with another mythological figure to see who possesses information that the other lacks; for Odin, knowledge is always power.

Gylfi's questions seem utterly ingenuous; sometimes, the Æsir even think that he is being naïve. Their responses, in turn, are straightforward, though not always consistent. To begin with, they discuss the origins of the world, its constitution, and the nature of the gods who inhabit it. Their answer to the very first questions that Gylfi asks, however, reveals another aspect of Snorri's Christian perspective on this material:

> Gangleri began his questioning thus:
>
> 'Who is the highest and most ancient of all gods?'
>
> Hár said: 'He is called All-Father in our language, but in Old Ásgarðr he had twelve names [. . .]'

> Then Gangleri asked: ‘Where is this god, what power has he, and what great works has he performed?’
>
> Hár said: ‘He lives throughout all ages and rules all his kingdom and governs all things great and small.’
>
> Then spoke Just-as high: ‘He made heaven and earth and the skies and everything in them.’
>
> Then spoke Þriði: ‘But his greatest work is that he made man and gave him a soul that shall live and never perish though the body decay to dust or burn to ashes. And all men who are righteous shall live and dwell with him in the place called Gimlé or Vingólf, but wicked men go to Hel and on to Niflhel; that is down in the ninth world.’[15]

Although ‘All-father’ is an attested, albeit rare, name for Odin, this information has been strongly coloured by a Christian author’s opinions, and this initial explanation of the creation of the Norse universe has no parallel in any earlier mythological source. All-father’s achievements remind us of the Christian God-as-creator to whom Snorri alluded at the very beginning of the *Prologue* in practically identical terms. His role in creating mankind is shared by Odin and his brothers, according to *Völuspá*, but the rest of Þriði’s answer to Gylfi’s question definitely reflects Christian dogma: the concept of the ‘soul’ had no currency in pagan thought, and the idea that one’s fate in the afterlife depended on being either good or wicked in this life strongly recalls Christian attitudes. There is no evidence from sources outside of *Gylfaginning* that there was a moral distinction between which pagans went to hell and which went to Odin’s halls after their deaths. It seems curious that Snorri should choose to put these ideas into the mouths of paganism’s spokesmen, but perhaps his aim is to show once again that his ancestors had come close to recognizing the existence of the true God – they understood that there must be a single divine power that guided events in the universe, even if they had misidentified him as one of their own deities. This passage certainly ties in well with the theory that underpins the *Prologue*, although it causes a significant logical discontinuity in the Æsir’s statements when they try to tell a more conventional version of the pagan creation myth – which Snorri knew from *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*. In these poems, Odin is not the primary creator of the universe, but one of its early inhabitants, whose main role is giving life to men and women. As far as we can tell, older myths of creation had the world come into being spontaneously, at first in the form of the giant Ymir, out of whose corpse the physical world was made. The two creation myths of *Gylfaginning* do not align with each other – perhaps their inconsistency is something that Snorri

wanted to highlight.

Gylfi is not a Christian, and he is therefore not able to draw attention directly to the errors and absurdities that a Christian readership might perceive behind the *Æsir*'s statements. But it is always clear that he is an outsider to their religion, and he never gives any indication of being persuaded; Hár tells him again that:

> Odin and his brothers must be the rulers of heaven and earth; it is our opinion that this must be what he is called. This is the name of the one who is the greatest and most glorious that we know, and you would do well to agree to call him that too.[16]

We might think that Snorri is on dangerous ground at this point. What if Gylfi – and by implication his Christian audience – is convinced, and decides to call Odin the 'ruler of heaven and earth'? But Gylfi is unmoved, and moves on to another question – 'how did the giants and gods get on together?' – which in turn leads to an account of a great flood that killed the first family of frost giants: the parallels with the story of Noah's ark are obvious.

Only at the end of *Gylfaginning* do we really find out why the *Æsir* are unable to convince us of their claims to divinity. Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði have related all they know about the history of the universe, right up to the final battle at the end of the world, its destruction and rebirth, a narrative in which Snorri closely follows *Völuspá*'s account. Suddenly, Hár brings the curtain down on his conversation with Gylfi:

> And now if you know any more questions to ask further into the future, I do not know where you will find the answers, for I have heard no one relate the history of the world any further on in time. And may the knowledge you have gained do you good.[17]

One difference between Christianity and paganism was that paganism offered no future, while Christianity held out the promise of eternal life in God's kingdom. This distinction was often made in medieval literary and historical texts, as well as in Christian theology. The flaw in paganism was its finiteness. Whatever it offered to its adherents as rewards and compensations in this life or the afterlife would eventually come to an end, as *Völuspá*'s apocalyptic message confirms. Christianity, by contrast, offered stability over mutability and permanence over transience. Hár has exhausted the store of information that he can offer about *his* universe, but there is another universe out there, knowledge of which might *really* do Gylfi some good.

As if to confirm the flimsiness of the religious content of their speeches, as soon as Hár has finished, Ásgarðr vanishes and the *Æsir* disappear: 'Next Gangleri heard great noises in every direction from him, and he looked out to one side. And when he looked around further he found that he was standing out on open ground, could see no hall and no castle'.[18] The optical illusions that the *Æsir* prepared for Gylfi's arrival are finally revealed for what they are, and the whole edifice of pagan culture collapses, leaving no trace. It is difficult not to view this ending as symbolizing the impermanence of the pagan world, and its fundamental lack of substance. Just as the *Prologue* tells us that pagans became deluded into attributing divine powers to earthly things, so *Gylfaginning*'s frame narrative shows paganism up for what, to a Christian audience, it must be: a set of interesting and powerful stories that ultimately have no basis in reality.

BALDR'S DEATH ACCORDING TO SNORRI

Within this ingenious framework, Snorri puts self-contained narratives in the mouths of his unreliable, pseudo-divine narrators. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri includes those myths that also survive in eddic poetry – he clearly differentiated between this type of verse and skaldic court poetry, as he places the mythic narratives from poems within the skaldic tradition in *Skáldskaparmál*. Snorri appears not to have known the full corpus of eddic verse as preserved by the Codex Regius, but he quotes directly from *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, as well as from the 'shorter *Völuspá*', which itself is preserved outside the main *Poetic Edda*. Many of the stories in *Gylfaginning* contain citations of eddic verse, which provide Snorri's versions with a ring of authenticity. Sometimes Snorri's myths are close paraphrases of his poetic source; at other times he elaborates them with information that he has gleaned from alternative sources – his telling of the myth of Thor and the serpent is a case in point. And sometimes he includes substantial narratives for which we do not have an alternative source, or which depart significantly from any known version of the myth. As an example of this last type of narrative, and by way of comparison with Saxo's version of the same story, I shall now turn to Snorri's treatment of the myth of Baldr's death.

The Baldr myth follows Snorri's account of Thor's fishing expedition, but there is no direct connection between the two tales: Gylfi simply asks

whether any even greater events (than Thor's encounter with Miðgarðsormr) had ever befallen the gods. Hár at once begins to tell the story of Baldr's death, which he considers to be the most significant event in the history of the Æsir, and 'the unluckiest deed ever done among gods and men'.[19] In telling this story, Snorri does not quote from any of his poetic sources directly. Structurally, this myth resembles the version told in *Völuspá*, in that the progression from Baldr's death to Ragnarök is common to them both, but Snorri includes many details that are found nowhere in the *Poetic Edda* and to which earlier skalds scarcely, if ever, made allusion. Perhaps Snorri knew the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar* or a similar source, since his story begins with Baldr having troubling dreams that prompt the Æsir to seek assurances from the whole of creation that nothing shall harm Baldr; *Völuspá* lacks this detail. But the story of how Frigg gets promises from everything in the world, omitting only the fateful mistletoe, is unique to Snorri's version. In *Völuspá*, Loki is clearly involved in Baldr's death, but the manner by which he brings this deed about is glossed over. *Gylfaginning* explores Loki's role much more fully: Loki is jealous of Baldr, and his jealousy leads him, in the disguise of an old woman, to seek out Frigg and discover Baldr's hidden vulnerability to the mistletoe. We then see Loki cajoling blind Höðr into taking part in the Æsir's seemingly harmless – but actually utterly reckless – game in which they fling weapons at Baldr and laugh as they bounce off him, without leaving a scratch. Loki guides Höðr's hand, into which he has placed the sprig of mistletoe; thus Baldr dies – a victim of Loki's spite and the gods' complacency. The basic pattern of the myth was probably borrowed from *Völuspá*, but Snorri fleshes out his source to create a narrative in which cause, effect, motivation and consequences are more readily apparent than they are in the poem.

Snorri also devotes much more space to the aftermath of Baldr's death than *Völuspá* does. In the poem, the story's progression from the murder to Váli's vengeance to Loki's punishment to the beginning of Ragnarök is compressed into a few stanzas (31–36). Snorri, on the other hand, has a detailed description of Baldr's funeral – which is mentioned in *Völuspá* and in Saxo's account. All three texts specify that he was burned on a pyre; but for Snorri it is a major set-piece within the story. As we saw in Chapter 5, the most closely comparable account of Baldr's funeral comes from Úlfr Uggason's skaldic poem *Húsdrápa*, which Snorri certainly knew. But even this source cannot account for all the details in Snorri's narrative, including the important

fact that his adoring wife, Nanna, joined him on the pyre.

The other innovation that Snorri introduces into the Baldr myth in *Gylfaginning* is an account of the journey undertaken by Hermóðr – an enigmatic deity who has no important role in any of the mythological poems, and who may originally have been a legendary (but human) Germanic hero – to the realm of Hel, where he hopes to negotiate Baldr's return to the land of the living. Hermóðr's ride to Hel on Odin's great eight-legged steed, Sleipnir, is described vividly. He rides for nine nights through deep, dark dales; he crosses a golden bridge over the river Gjöll, which marks the border of Hel's territory, and encounters a giantess named Móðguðr. Finally, Sleipnir makes an astonishing leap over the high walls of Hel's citadel, and Hermóðr is granted an audience by the goddess of death. Hel is not as unsympathetic a character as we might expect: Baldr and Nanna are treated with honour in her halls, and she responds quite reasonably to Hermóðr's request that the dead Æsir should be allowed to return home to Ásgarðr. If Hermóðr can prove how very beloved Baldr was by persuading all of creation to weep for him, she says, she will release him forthwith. Hermóðr rides straight back to Ásgarðr and the gods at once send messages to every living being and every inanimate object in the cosmos, asking them to weep Baldr out of Hel. In a neat inversion of the sequence in which the gods tried to avoid Baldr's death by extracting a promise not to harm him from everything in the universe, now the Æsir discover that all but one thing in the whole of creation are prepared to bring him back to life with their tears. Their messengers are hurrying back to report on the success of their mission – people and animals, stones and trees had all been moved to cry for Baldr – when they discover one being who had previously been unknown to them – a giantess, sitting in a cave:

> She said her name was Þökk ['Thanks']. They bade her weep Baldr out of Hel. She said: 'Þökk will weep dry tears for Baldr's burial. No good got I from the old one's son either dead or alive. Let Hel hold what she has.'[20]

The speech of the ironically named 'Thanks' takes the form of a single stanza of eddic-style verse, which is unknown from any other source. Hár then speculates that this alias disguises the fact that the giantess was Loki in disguise, paralleling his earlier role in obtaining information about Baldr's Achilles' heel. In Snorri's version alone, the whole myth of Baldr's death is structured around Loki's involvement in the three main stages of the process: the failed protection, the actual killing, and the failed revival. In this way, the

subsequent story in *Gylfaginning*, which tells of the *Æ*sir's pursuit, capture and punishment of Loki, flows more smoothly out of the conclusion of the Baldr myth than it does in *Völuspá*, where Loki's role in the murder is never made explicit, and where the reasons for his gruesome punishment – bound in fetters made from the guts of his son, Váli – are not actually mentioned.

We can assume that the poet of *Völuspá* expected his audience to know enough about Loki's role in instigating Baldr's death to fill in the gaps for themselves. It is much less certain, however, that we should automatically assume that Snorri's version of the myth is identical with other, earlier traditions. Because Snorri's narrative gives us the fullest and tidiest account of these momentous events, his readers tend to accept that he provides us with the 'true' myth – the myth in its best and most authentic form – and that we can use *Gylfaginning* to flesh out the skeleton of the story that *Völuspá* provides. But there are problems with this approach.

The main issue that confronts us when we read Snorri's Baldr myth is his relationship to his sources; indeed, it is difficult to know whether he even had any sources for this particular narrative because he makes no direct reference to them. Snorri may have produced his narrative by combining the general structure of the *Völuspá* myth with the details about Baldr's funeral that he could extract from *Húsdrápa*; but this combination still leaves several crucial aspects of the story unaccounted for. We therefore wonder if now-lost poems or unknown traditions about Loki's trickery, Frigg's attempts to protect Baldr, and Hermóðr's ride to Hel were in circulation in thirteenth-century Iceland. The fact that Þökk responds in verse to the gods' request that she should weep for Baldr is curious and may suggest the existence of an older eddic poem on the same subject. But if this is the case, Snorri's treatment of the stanza runs contrary to the way he handles verse citations elsewhere in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri generally names the poem from which he has abstracted his citation, and these poems are used to authenticate the *Æ*sir's answers to Gylfi's questions. It seems unlikely that Þökk's speech – if it is part of an older poem – would never have been repeated or mentioned in any other medieval source: the whole story of Hermóðr's ride to Hel is conspicuously absent from all surviving eddic poetry.

If Snorri's main source were a skaldic poem, however, he might choose not to mention it in *Gylfaginning*, since he clearly differentiated between the two types of verse; skaldic poetry is cited in *Skáldskaparmál*, eddic in *Gylfaginning*, reflecting Snorri's conception of the more fundamentally

mythological function of the eddic style. But Hermóðr's ride to Hel, which is so important to Snorri's version of events, is simply not mentioned by pagan skalds. Even if Snorri's own specific source had been lost, we might reasonably assume that some poet, somewhere, would have preserved traces of this story in one of his kennings.

In fact, one skaldic poem does refer to a similar version of the Baldr myth. A thirteenth-century work called *Málsháttakvæði* includes a stanza that contains many, though not all, of Snorri's elements:

> Frigg's son [Baldr] seemed a loss, he was said to come from a great family; Hermóðr wished to increase his life, Eljúðnir managed to swallow Baldr, all wept for him, the ban on laughter was increased for them, the story about him is often heard, why should I harp on about this?[21]

On the face of it, this verse might seem like a plausible, though partial, source for Snorri's narrative. It refers to the 'all creation wept' motif, and Hermóðr has a role in trying to 'increase his [i.e. Baldr's] life'. The poet even suggests that this story is so well known as to make a longer recapitulation of it superfluous. Perhaps it was; but *Málsháttakvæði* is a very late poem, possibly younger than *Gylfaginning*. Both texts are products of the same antiquarian revival of interest in pagan myths in the Norse world: Bjarni Kolbeinsson, to whom *Málsháttakvæði* is normally attributed, was bishop of Orkney between 1188 and 1223. Bishop Bjarni was of course no pagan, and his poetry has an ironic, detached attitude towards its mythological references. Snorri had family connections in Orkney, a region which certainly participated in this late flowering of interest in traditional poetics, and it is just possible that *Snorra Edda* is the source for *Málsháttakvæði* and not the other way around. The fact that this poet refers to Hel by the name 'Eljúðnir' leads me to suspect that this is the case, since this name for Hel's hall is found on only one other occasion in the whole of Old Norse literature: in Snorri's description of the goddess Hel in *Gylfaginning*. While these two texts might be related, we cannot be sure in which direction the influence between them has run. *Málsháttakvæði* and *Gylfaginning*, at any rate, only reveal a thirteenth-century idea of the elements that made up the full Baldr myth. The fact that they both include a reference to Hermóðr is not enough on its own to prove that that part of the story was part of a long or widespread tradition, still less that the 'original' form of the myth – as we might suppose it circulated in the pagan period – precisely resembled Snorri's version.

Since we are not able to identify a definite source for Snorri's Baldr myth, and since many of its features are entirely absent from poetry of earlier periods, we might be inclined to see Snorri's story as being new rather than old, innovative rather than traditional, original rather than derivative. Snorri might have partly made it up, in other words. It has proved controversial over the years to suggest that Snorri's version of Norse mythology is inauthentic and that it does not represent with any accuracy genuine pagan traditions. Yet we have already seen that Snorri's agenda as a Christian cultural historian and a mythographer has shaped the frame-narrative of *Gylfaginning* in important ways. Some scholars have been inclined to believe that Snorri's interventions in the myths themselves work together with his frame-narrative to give these pagan stories a Christian colouring; in the case of Baldr's death, I find this suggestion very persuasive.

As long ago as 1893, Sophus Bugge produced a detailed analysis of the motifs surrounding Baldr's death that traced their correspondences to Christian lore.[22] Bugge believed that the story of Baldr's death as *Völuspá* tells it was produced in northern England in the Viking Age, and that the possible Christian influences on the story entered it through pagan-Christian contact in this milieu. He noted several similarities between the Baldr myth and references to Christ's crucifixion in Old English poetry in support of this theory. For a start, the name Baldr derives from a Germanic word meaning 'lord', which was used – in the form *Bealdor* – as a name for Christ in Anglo-Saxon literature. This shared name may have prompted conversion-era poets to transfer some attributes and narratives from the Christian god to his pagan equivalent: Baldr's representation as beautiful, white and pure, his role as a guiltless sacrifice by which the Æsir are 'redeemed', and his eventual 'resurrection' have also been seen as being somewhat Christlike. The details that Snorri adds to the Baldr myth can similarly be located in Christian traditions. The famous Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* states that 'all creation wept' at the moment of Christ's death; similar motifs are found in Old Irish literature. Perhaps the ultimate source for this idea is a tract by Pope Leo the Great (440–461), which states that 'all creation groaned' when Christ was put on the cross. But the entire Norse universe did not weep for Baldr: the giantess Þökk thanklessly refused. Even this detail can be paralleled in Christian literature. In his eighth homily on the Gospels, another pope, Gregory the Great (590–604), specifies that not quite *everything* acknowledged Christ's divinity by their sorrow at his death. Gregory

enumerates the ways in which the different elements of creation – including the rocks, sea and sun – perceived Christ as Lord: the earth trembled when he died, the sky turned black and buildings tumbled to the ground. But, continues Gregory, the Jews who turned away from Christ were harder-hearted even than rocks, refusing 'to acknowledge him whom . . . the elements proclaimed to be God either by their signs or by being broken'.[23] Clearly the two stories are not identical, but the idea that all things – both animate and inanimate – grieved for the god, apart from one alone who refuses to take part, seems suggestively similar. When combined with the relatively well-known idea that all creation wept at Christ's death, Gregory's homily may lead us to suspect that at some point in the transmission of the Baldr myth it has been susceptible to Christian influence. Gregory's homilies were known in Iceland and translated into Old Norse, and they provided an important source for the types of sermon that Snorri might have heard preached each Sunday in church.

Hermóðr's ride to Hel has similar resonances with Christian myth. Although many scholars believe that this narrative must have existed in an earlier form, perhaps an eddic poem called something like *Hermóðs Helreið*, there is no definite evidence to support this theory, since no older poetry makes reference to this element of the myth. It may not be integral to the pagan myth at all. Hermóðr's journey takes him through a landscape that strongly resembles the Christian hell as it is represented in contemporary vision literature, which was certainly fashionable and influential in Snorri's day. Although eddic sources emphasize that the pagan Hel was located underground, many of the features that Hermóðr encounters – the dark valleys he traverses, the bridge at the entrance to the otherworld, the guardian-figure who sits at Hel's boundary, and the high walls of Hel's halls themselves, over which no normal horse could jump – are also regularly present in descriptions of the Christian inferno as it was often revealed to sinners in dream-visions.

The basic pattern of Hermóðr's journey, too, is similar to one of the most famous apocryphal stories about Christ – his Harrowing of Hell, a narrative that captured the medieval imagination, and which was well known in Iceland. The story of the Harrowing of Hell tells how Christ, in the period between his death and resurrection, descended to hell in order to release the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament from Satan's grasp. Though blameless, these figures had been condemned to damnation – so early

Christian doctrine went – because they had lived before Christ's incarnation. Like Hermóðr's story, the Harrowing of Hell tells of a god visiting the underworld in an attempt to retrieve the dead who are incarcerated there through no fault of their own. In many versions of the Harrowing, hell is personified as the character Inferus, with whom Christ argues over the souls of the prophets. Christ, however, succeeds in his mission where Hermóðr fails. Snorri's contemporaries are likely to have been familiar with the story of the Harrowing, which survives in Old Norse as *Niðrstigningar saga* ('The Story of the Descent'), and they may well have picked up on these correspondences between the two narratives.

When writing about pagan gods for a Christian audience, Snorri may well have found it desirable to make implicit connections between the two mythologies in order to further the agenda that he sets out in the *Prologue*: the idea that paganism and Christianity are fundamentally similar in certain ways, but that Christianity represents the truth and paganism a delusion. By drawing attention to the superficial similarities between the two religions and their myths, he could also encourage people to think about their differences and to recognize the primacy of the new system over the old. But his strategy of emphasizing those elements of pagan myths that have similarities to Christian stories also has the advantage of making his narrative more accessible to an audience that was largely unfamiliar with pagan traditions. It seems that one of Snorri's aims was to bring about a revival in interest in the culture of his ancestors; one way that he may have done so was to make the old stories feel more familiar to new audiences by introducing elements that would remind them of myths from their own, current mythology – as represented by the Bible and the Church's teachings.

Snorra Edda is an extremely complex text that operates on multiple levels. It is a handbook for the composition and appreciation of skaldic poetry; it is a repository of traditional poems and a storehouse of mythic narratives; in *Gylfaginning* it also provides a new, overarching mythology of and for Scandinavian paganism. It is essential to our understanding of other sources; without it, indeed, Norse mythology as we know it would hardly exist.

But we must not naively accept Snorri's myths as records of a 'true' pagan mythology, still less of actual pre-Christian beliefs. Both the *Prologue* and the 'advice to young poets' section of *Skáldskaparmál* make it quite clear that the stories Snorri tells are not worthy of belief: they are fundamentally untrue. The *Prologue*, rather like Saxo Grammaticus's work, treats the great

delusion of paganism as a historical phenomenon. It happened for discernible historical reasons, as part of an evolutionary process of cultural development. This viewpoint is close to the one that Snorri exhibits in his other history of the pagan era in Scandinavia – *Ynglinga saga*. And it seems to me uncontroversial to suggest that Snorri intended his *Prologue* to act as a buffer between his Christian contemporaries and their misguided ancestors' unacceptable paganism. Snorri famously never condemns paganism as being evil in the way that medieval churchmen did; but that does not mean that he approved of it. Snorri's agenda is explicit in the *Prologue*, but implicit in *Gylfaginning*. Yet an agenda there is, even in the main mythological section of the *Edda*. The consistency of Snorri's framing and distancing devices, together with the very real possibility that he has simply re-invented some of the myths to suit the needs of his narrative, his Christian outlook, and his aesthetic preferences, leads me to think that we should read *Snorra Edda* as an integral whole. The component parts of this whole work together in support of Snorri's overall aim, which was to make pagan myth accessible, enjoyable, yet still safe for a relatively sophisticated Christian audience to encounter.

THE CREATION OF THE *POETIC EDDA*

It may seem perverse to end this book with the *Poetic Edda*, which contains texts that are often given a privileged status as the 'best' and 'most authentic' sources for the Norse myths. There is good evidence to suggest that some of these poems existed in the pagan period, being transmitted orally until an unknown scribe at some point decided to copy them out into a manuscript; but the *Poetic Edda* itself, considered as a discrete entity, only came into being around 1270. It thus probably postdates the original composition of *Snorra Edda*. The *Poetic Edda* is, in fact, one of the *last* great monuments of pagan Norse mythology. It is also as much a product of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century antiquarian 'renaissance' as the other texts that we have considered in this chapter.

However, we know nothing about the genesis of the Codex Regius manuscript that contains the *Poetic Edda*; we do not even know if it bore that title in the Middle Ages: on balance, it seems improbable. (Medieval

Icelanders thought of Snorri's work when they referred to the *Edda*, which they conceived as being primarily a treatise about poetry.) There is no contextual information that we might use to understand where, by whom, and above all *why* the Codex Regius was produced. It is possible that Snorri's work itself prompted a renewed interest in preserving these mythological poems and legends about ancient heroes, although we must bear in mind that the Codex Regius is older than any of the surviving manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*. Copies of Snorri's work only survive from the fourteenth century onwards, meaning that there is a significant gap between the text's original composition and the date of its manuscripts. It is thus difficult to provide a relative chronology for the development of the eddas.

Whereas Snorri's *Edda* is concerned with skaldic as well as eddic poetry, and with poetic technique as much as mythology, the only rationale that we can observe behind the compilation of the *Poetic Edda* manuscript seems to be to collect and arrange poems that are linked by their mythological or heroic subject matter and their use of eddic metres. It is difficult to tell whether the compiler has been very selective in choosing the texts to go into his book, or whether he simply copied down all the poems of this type that were known to him. At the same time, the compiler of the Codex Regius has not simply copied poems; he has organized them into a sequence whose logic is discernible, and he has included passages in prose that link several of the poems. The prose found in the *Poetic Edda* is often overlooked by students of Norse mythology, since it is clearly not integral to the poems' own narratives. These passages are probably no older than the manuscript that contains them, while several of the verse texts are likely centuries older than the codex. But if we are to understand how the *Poetic Edda* works as a whole, these linking passages in prose are important precisely because they are late additions: they may help us understand the purpose of the compilation and the methods of the compiler; in this way, they reveal something about the *Poetic Edda* as being a *new* body of myth, created with the needs of a thirteenth-century audience in mind.

As we have seen, there is good evidence that some of the poems in the *Poetic Edda* are substantially older than the manuscript, and it is likely that several were composed in the pagan era. Others, like *Hymiskviða*, are not very much older than the Codex Regius, and were in all probability composed long after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, although they did draw on older mythological traditions. Even the Odinic poem *Hávamál*,

which seems so firmly rooted in the pagan worldview and which possibly was alluded to in Eyvindr skáldaspillir's tenth-century *Hákonarmál*, is probably a conflation of two or three earlier poems about the chief of the gods. We do not know whether their amalgamation into a single text occurred at a relatively early stage of transmission; or if the current form of the poem owes itself to the decisions of an 'editor', who noticed the correspondences between the component poems and wove them together as part of the process by which they were written down.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, the order of the texts in the *Poetic Edda* seems to group poems according to their content and the protagonists involved. The first four poems – *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* – are all concerned with obtaining, sharing, or competing about knowledge and wisdom, and Odin has the leading role in each. *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* show no signs of the compiler's intervention in their texts: they are not accompanied by any prose narrative, nor does the scribe signal which character is speaking as he does in later texts. These two poems are both monologues, which may explain this absence, but it is also tempting to hypothesize that the compiler added no extra information to these famous poems because he expected his audience to be familiar with what was going on in them already. *Völuspá* was relatively well known in the thirteenth century, when it was cited extensively by Snorri and recorded in a separate version in *Hauksbók* (written c. 1300). This assumption of familiarity may also be indicated by the scribe's propensity to abbreviate *Völuspá*'s repeated refrains. Although he spells out the phrase in full the first time it appears, subsequent appearances of each refrain are reduced to initial letters: *þá gengo regin öll á röcstóla* (Stanza 6: 'Then all the Powers went to the thrones of fate') becomes *þa g. r. a. ar.* thereafter. Unless the reader of the Codex Regius knew the poem already, he or she would have to refer back frequently within the text to the first occurrence of the refrain. Since this manuscript – like the majority of medieval Icelandic books – copies out verse in the same format as prose, making no differentiation between lines or stanzas, this is not an intuitive step to take. However, if one is already aware that *Völuspá* contains these repeated refrains, the abbreviation can easily serve as a cue that brings the line in question to one's mind.

The Codex Regius gives no titles for the first few of the mythological poems, further reinforcing the idea that its readership may have been expected to know these poems already. The different texts are demarcated

only by a large decorated capital letter at the beginning of each. Significant names are sometimes abbreviated without explanation, too: Frigg is shortened to *Fg* at the start of *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example. Of course, this device is used to save space on the page, but it also suggests that the book's audience would possess some degree of prior knowledge about the gods.

Between *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, two poems which are very similar in both their form and content – and both of which were also used by Snorri – the Codex Regius scribe has made his first decisive change to the manuscript, by introducing a long prose passage that describes the background to the story that *Grímnismál* then narrates. It tells of King Hrauðungr's two sons, Agnarr and Geirrøðr, who were adopted as children by Odin and Frigg and had disguised themselves and were living among mortals for reasons that are not made clear. The two boys' fortunes take different courses: Agnarr ends up the unwilling husband to a giantess while Geirrøðr inherits his father's kingdom, thanks to Odin's advice. Later, Odin and Frigg bicker about the foster-sons, and Frigg insults Geirrøðr by saying that he is famously stingy with food, and will torture unwanted guests to his hall. Odin sets out to prove his wife wrong, but Geirrøðr proves the accusations against him true by having Odin arrested and tied up between two fires, close enough that they start to burn him. Geirrøðr's son, also called Agnarr, takes pity on Odin and gives him a drink; the poem *Grímnismál* and all its great store of mythological knowledge is the reward that Odin bestows on Agnarr for his kindness.

We do not know much about the origins of the prose narrative with which the Codex Regius prefaces *Grímnismál*. Its characters are not found elsewhere, although Geirrøðr is also the name the name of the giant whom Thor visits in the famous myth told in *Þórsdrápa* and retold by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*. An Agnarr also appears briefly in the prose introduction to the heroic poem *Sigrdrífumál* in the *Poetic Edda*. But it is impossible to state that the *Grímnismál* prose is part of the wider myth that underlies the poem. The compiler has chosen to include this additional material here simply because without it we would find it very difficult to understand what is going on at the start of *Grímnismál*, which begins *in medias res*, with Odin already tied up between the fires. The poem gives no indication of the speaker's identity:

'Hot are you, fire, and rather too fierce;

go away, sparks!
My fur cloak singes, though I lift it in the air,
my mantle burns before me.

Eight nights I have sat here between the fires,
and no one offered me food,
except Agnarr alone, and he alone shall rule,
the son of Geirrøðr, over the land of the Goths.

Blessed shall you be, Agnarr,
since Odin bids you be blest;
for one drink you shall never
get a better reward.'[24]

Without the contextual information that the prose supplies, these opening verses would be difficult to comprehend. Why is Odin being burned? Who is Agnarr? What is the significance of his gift of a drink to Odin? Perhaps the *Grímnismál* myth was less well known than the poems that precede it in the manuscript; in any case, its narrative is more open-ended than that of *Vafþrúðnismál*, which it resembles so much in its content. Although *Vafþrúðnismál* is expressed throughout in the direct speech of three characters – Odin, Frigg and the giant Vafþrúðnir himself – it is easy to discern what is going on from their dialogue. The setting and narrative antecedents of *Grímnismál*, meanwhile, are sufficiently ambiguous in the poem itself that the prose introduction serves a very useful purpose in explaining the events that have led up to Odin's speech. A much briefer epilogue in prose also brings the story to a satisfying conclusion, explaining how Odin ends his soliloquy by revealing the final piece of mythological knowledge that he had been hiding – his own identity – at which point Geirrøðr accidentally stabs himself with his sword, bringing Odin's prophecy to pass, since Agnarr at once succeeds him to the kingdom.

The next poem in the Codex Regius is the first to be given a title; *För Skírnis* is inscribed in red between the end of the *Grímnismál* prose and the beginning of another prose section, which is also marked with a large green capital letter. *För Skírnis* (or *Skírnismál*) initiates a sequence of independent narratives about the deeds of a particular god: here, as we have seen, Freyr is the protagonist. There are several prose inserts in *För Skírnis*. The preamble briefly sets the scene – presumably because, once again, the opening stanza of the poem does not tell us who is speaking and under what circumstances.

In this instance, the scribe provides guidance throughout in the form of information about who speaks each verse; although *För Skírnis* has a strong narrative thread, the whole poem is in direct speech and on this occasion there are multiple speakers. So the poem begins with ‘Skaði said’, and ‘Skírnir said’ marks the first change of speaker before Stanza 2. This text also includes what look rather like ‘programme notes’ to help the audience understand the transitions between scenes that occur, as between Stanzas 10 and 11, where the manuscript inserts:

> Skírnir rode to Jötunheimir to the courts of Gymir. There were savage dogs tied in front of the wooden fence which surrounded Gerðr’s hall. He rode to where a herdsman was sitting on a mound and greeted him . . .[25]

To some scholars, the use of cues to indicate the various speakers has suggested that poems like *För Skírnis* were originally performed dramatically, perhaps even as some sort of ritual play. Although I think it likely that *För Skírnis* has quite a long tradition behind it – and one can imagine its being staged quite successfully – it is unfortunately difficult to prove its origins in ancient drama; there is indeed hardly any evidence for the existence of dramatic performances in early medieval Scandinavia. Even if this poem had never been intended for performance by multiple actors, however, its multiplicity of voices and sudden changes of scene would be confusing to say the least if one were not already familiar with the story being told. Before Stanza 10, the cue is particularly specific: ‘Skírnir said to the horse’. This is necessary information, since previously Skírnir had been in conversation with Freyr; when he says, ‘I declare it’s time for us to go over the dewy mountain’, we would naturally assume that he was still talking to the god, even though we do not expect Freyr to accompany Skírnir on his journey. One of the attractive aspects of the theory that places the origin of these poems in performance is that on stage the audience would be able to *see* whom Skírnir addresses. The function of the prose in and around *För Skírnis* is to enable a type of audience that did not have the advantage of seeing the story unfold before their eyes, and to whom the myth may have not been utterly familiar, to make sense of the words as they encountered them on the page or heard them read aloud.

THE PROBLEM OF *LOKASENNA*

The Codex Regius compiler generally makes no effort to link the poems into a cohesive and progressive sequence; each text stands alone, and there is no internal chronology to the events they describe. *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Hymiskviða* – two poems centring on Thor – follow *För Skírnis*, but they do not follow on from it or from each other. But perhaps the position of *Lokasenna* in the sequence has been chosen with particular care. Occurring in a sequence of Thor-myths, *Lokasenna* stands out for the simple reason that Thor is not present in the poem until its very end. Yet the prose introduction to *Lokasenna* makes it clear that Thor's absence is necessary to the narrative set-up: 'Thor did not come [to *Ægir*'s feast], because he was away in the east'.[26] When Thor travels east, we know that he is off fighting giants, just as he was seen to do in the preceding poem, *Hymiskviða*. So perhaps *Lokasenna*'s precise position in the manuscript does reveal a conception of a wider narrative arc into which some of the myths, at least, may be placed.

Lokasenna occupies a peculiar place in both the *Poetic Edda* and in Norse mythology more generally. The events of *Lokasenna* take place at a particular point in mythic history – between Baldr's death and the beginning of Ragnarök: by this point in the story the gods have become aware that Loki is responsible for Baldr's murder (indeed, Loki taunts Frigg with a veiled admission of this guilt in Stanza 28) but they have not yet punished him for the crime. Where the narrative poems about Thor and Freyr that surround *Lokasenna* can be read as standalone pieces, this text seems to require of its audience a full awareness of events that have preceded it in the sequence that *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* provide. But *Lokasenna* refers to many external narratives beyond the Baldr myth. It consists of a sequence of dialogues between Loki and several of the other *Æsir* in turn. In each case, Loki levels an accusation of some base, cowardly or dishonourable behaviour at his opponent. The gods cannot refute his accusations – we can be fairly sure that they have some foundation in the truth – so they respond in kind, reminding Loki of all the terrible things that he has done in his time.

The catalogue of calumny that results from this exchange paints none of the *Æsir* in a very positive light: Bragi is timid in battle; Iðunn, Gefjon, Skaði, Frigg and Freyja – all the goddesses mentioned, in fact – are (at best) 'whores'; Odin is capricious and unfair and has practised shameful magic that marks him out as a 'pervert'. Njörðr has had an incestuous relationship with his sister and been used as a 'pisspot' by some giantesses; Loki even accuses Thor of cowardice, when the mightiest of the gods returns from his

expedition in the east. If Loki does not have a good insult about a god's behaviour he taunts them with his own misdeeds: according to this poem he has sired a son by Týr's unnamed wife and slept with Thor's bride, Sif; he boasts of having killed Skaði's father, the giant Þjazi, as well as of his complicity in Baldr's downfall. The charges that the Æsir put to him affect Loki not at all; even when Odin and Njördr accuse him of living for eight years as a woman and bearing children, Loki has his comeback ready. All the company gathered at the feast know what has happened, and what must happen in the future: it seems that the pervasive sense of doom that hangs over their gathering gives all the gods licence to air each other's dirty laundry in public.

Lokasenna, with its lively and inventive dialogue and very broad frame of references, is undoubtedly one of the high points in the *Poetic Edda*. It combines outrageously bawdy comedy with a serious purpose, and the poet skilfully captures the tension and animosity that exists among the gods at a time when they are already in crisis following Baldr's death. We get a clear impression that they are aware of their impotence in the face of what has befallen them and what faces them in their future. As it appears in the Codex Regius, *Lokasenna* resembles *För Skírnis* in its use of cues to indicate different speakers, occasional transitional passages, a prose prologue that sets the scene and an epilogue that describes the aftermath of the Æsir's confrontation with Loki, their pursuit and capture of him, and his subsequent binding beneath a venom-dripping snake. Both halves of the prose-frame around *Lokasenna* are very similar to events that Snorri Sturluson describes in the *Edda*, including the detail that Loki's writhing when splashed with the serpent's poison is the cause of earthquakes. The similarity between these prose versions of stories about Loki leads us to consider how *Lokasenna* itself relates to other sources.

There has been much debate about *Lokasenna*'s age and function, and critics have been unable to reach any consensus about either. If it is an old poem, part of a tradition that reaches back into the pre-Christian era, its attitude towards the gods has often struck readers as curious. Although Loki's role as the instigator of mischief and strife is well known throughout the corpus of Norse myths, and although none of the gods – with the possible exception of Baldr – are consistently represented as paragons of virtue, the portrayal of the Æsir in *Lokasenna* is so overwhelmingly negative as to cast doubt on its acceptability to any actual pagan worshippers. Apart from Thor,

who at least is shown to be powerful enough to chase Loki away at the end of the poem, the gods here seem to represent the personal traits that were least acceptable to pagan codes of honour and ethics. How could a community of believers stand to see its patron god humiliated in this way? But many of the surviving myths – including several about Thor, the most important god in the actual pantheon of Scandinavian pagan religion – have a comic tone, and we frequently find the gods placed in situations that make them look ignoble, weak or buffoonish. So the theory that *Lokasenna* must have been composed by a Christian who wanted to ridicule the old gods *en masse* for their immorality is probably far-fetched. The Norse gods were surprisingly human to their worshippers, as well as having undoubtedly divine power, and their foibles and failings were one way in which they could be brought down to a human level. I do not think, therefore, that we can propose a late dating for the composition of *Lokasenna* simply because the gods do not come out of this poem with their reputations enhanced.

I would be tempted to see *Lokasenna* as a relatively late poem for other reasons. In particular, it displays a tendency (rare in eddic verse) to collect and aggregate mythological narratives from a very wide range of sources into a single poem. Although many of Loki's accusations against the gods reflect their appearance in other sources, the sheer variety of material on display here suggests a conscious effort to collect all their negative attributes in one place. It is not the impulse towards insulting the gods, but the impulse towards bringing together such a wide range of different elements and attempting to get them to cohere by creating a frame narrative in which they can be presented, that seems to me to be the mark of a rather late, self-conscious and quite possibly literate poet. Just as Snorri wished to create a meta-narrative within which he could display as full a range of the myths known to him as possible, so the poet of *Lokasenna* uses the situation he has created – Loki's quarrel with the gods at a feast is not referred to elsewhere – as a framework within which he can tell all the most outrageous stories about the gods.

Whether it is a product of the thirteenth century 'renaissance' or an earlier period, the primary purpose of *Lokasenna* seems to be entertaining its audience. This audience must have had quite a sophisticated knowledge of all the gods and goddesses mentioned – some of the references in the poem are very obscure. But as we have seen in this chapter, we do not need to assume that only a pagan audience or a pagan poet could produce sophisticated

mythological texts that display a wide-ranging mythological knowledge. In fact, we could reasonably argue that writers like Snorri and the compiler of the *Poetic Edda* were in a better position to produce a *complete* mythology for the northern lands than their pagan predecessors, because they stood at the end of the tradition and could draw upon the widest range of sources available. To put it another way: rather than seeing the Norse myths as diminishing over time as elements from genuine traditions were lost, we might look on the creation of this mythology as an additive process. The Norse myths get fuller, more sophisticated and more interesting over time, as elements from these different traditions are combined in new and innovative ways. Even as the myths moved further away from their putative origins in pagan culture, they continued to grow and develop and capture the imaginations of new poets, scholars and presumably their audiences. *Lokasenna*, so it seems to me, is one of the best examples of this synthetic mode of mythic composition: it takes information from a wide variety of traditions and combines it into a new work of art, which itself becomes part of a new mythological tradition once it is given a central place in the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda*. Like *Snorra Edda*, or the history of Saxo Grammaticus, or the composition of the *Poetic Edda* itself, we see in *Lokasenna* the power that myth had to inspire new modes of expression well beyond the end of paganism as an active religious force.

CONCLUSION: AND WHAT CAME NEXT?

The flowering of mythological literature in Iceland in the thirteenth century was glorious but short-lived. *Snorra Edda* was copied a few times in the fourteenth century; around 1300, Haukr Erlendsson chose to include a text of *Völuspá* in his miscellaneous manuscript anthology, *Hauksbók*. There are some intriguing signs that other manuscripts were compiled along the same lines as the two eddas: perhaps the most interesting of these is the codex now known as AM 748 4to in the Arnamagnæan Collection. This manuscript, which dates from the first quarter of the fourteenth century, bridges the gap between Snorri's work and the *Poetic Edda*, in that it contains material drawn from both. It begins with the texts of six eddic poems, although they are often incomplete: *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Baldrs draumar*, *Skírnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*,

Grímnismál and *Hymiskviða*. The second half of the manuscript, which has now been separated from the mythological poems – there is some doubt about whether the two halves originally belonged together or not, although they are clearly related – contains a version of Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* and similar learned treatises relating to skaldic poetry and allied matters. There was, it seems, a continuing interest in preserving traditional poetry beyond the compilation of the *Poetic Edda*, and Snorri's work was still respected for more than a century after his death. But around this time the production of new myths seems to have begun to dry up. Skalds stopped using the traditional mythological kennings that Snorri and his contemporaries had briefly made fashionable again; skaldic poetry in general began its steady slide into obsolescence, largely to be replaced by *rímur* ('rhymes'), which became popular in Iceland under the influence of foreign literary forms. Although there are three fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *rímur* that feature mythological subjects – one deriving from the eddic *Þrymskviða* and the others drawing on stories taken from *Snorra Edda* – they add nothing new to the canon of Norse myth apart from end-rhyme. The sun had set on the last great period of myth-making in the Scandinavian pagan idiom.

Yet the history of the myths of the pagan North does not end at the point that the last medieval manuscript containing one of the eddas was copied out, or with the last utterance of a mythological kenning in the voice of some unfashionable skald. For the myths were rediscovered and reborn once again. Humanist scholars from Iceland and Denmark, and then from all over Europe, began to discover the manuscripts that contained *their* ancestors' myths in the sixteenth centuries; they began to edit and print the poems, to publish commentaries and dissertations on the meaning of the myths. The myths, in both poetry and prose, were translated into other languages and made available to increasingly wide audiences in places far indeed from their homelands in pagan Scandinavia. They began to influence new generations of artists – poets, painters, composers, novelists, comic book writers and the creators of role-playing games – and this influence is still felt in the twenty-first century. At every turn, the myths of the pagan North have grown, changed and developed to meet the needs of the new situations in which they find themselves. The body of Norse mythology is actually growing, not shrinking, even though we move ever further away from the world in which it originated. Each time it seems as if a major cultural shift might signal the end of the myths, they have risen up again, like the earth from the sea after

Ragnarök. And this to me seems to be the greatest power of myth: it never stops changing, yet its appeal is eternal.

Notes

Chapter 1: The Sources of Norse Mythology

1 E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), pp. 82–83.

2 Richard Perkins, *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001).

3 *Hávamál* 138–44, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 34–35.

4 *Heimskringla: The History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 4.

5 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987), p. 168.

6 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 64–65.

7 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes, Books I–IX*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), p. 5.

8 For an overview of the different versions of this myth, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Thor's fishing expedition', in *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue Between Archaeology and History of Religion*, ed. Gro Steinsland (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), pp. 257–78.

9 Snorri's version of the myth is found in the second section of *Snorra Edda, Gylfaginning*: Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 46–47.

10 Although the stanzas dealing with Thor's fishing expedition have long been considered part of *Ragnarsdrápa*, it is possible that they originally were part of a separate poem that dealt exclusively with this myth. In the forthcoming new edition of skaldic poetry, they are edited separately

from *Ragnarsdrápa*.

11 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73.

12 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73.

13 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 72.

14 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73. This stanza and the one that follows it are closely connected to one another, and may originally have been part of a single verse. *Snorra Edda* preserves them both, but at different points in *Skáldskaparmál*.

15 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 106.

16 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 142.

17 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 74.

18 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73.

19 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 72.

20 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73.

21 References to *Hymiskviða* are taken from *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Larrington, pp. 78–83.

22 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The structural study of myth', *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 428–44, p. 435.

Chapter 2: The Gods on the Ground

1 The Germanic peoples' system of reckoning time by days, and the division of the week into seven, probably came about under the influence of Roman practice. See D. H. Green, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 236–53.

2 *Germania*, ch. 9, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Harold Mattingly, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1970), pp. 108–9.

3 *Germania*, ch. 3, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Mattingly, p. 103.

4 *Germania*, ch. 40, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Mattingly, pp. 134–35.

5 *Germania*, ch. 10, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Mattingly, p. 110.

6 *Germania*, ch. 9, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Mattingly, p. 108.

7 *Germania*, ch. 10, in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. Mattingly, pp. 109–10.

8 These maps are based on data collected by Stefan Brink, 'How uniform was the Old Norse religion?', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. J. Quinn *et al*., (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 105–36; see also Brink, 'Naming the land', in *The Viking World*, ed. Brink and Neil Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 57–66.

9 Else Mundal, 'The position of the individual gods and goddesses in various types of sources – with special reference to the female divinities', in *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names* (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), pp. 294–315.

10 Signe Horn Fugelsang, 'Viking and medieval amulets in Sweden', *Fornvännen* 84 (1989), 15–27, p. 17.

11 Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 207.

12 Neil Price, 'What's in a name? An archaeological identity crisis for the Norse gods (and some of their friends', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 179–83.

13 Price, 'What's in a Name?', p. 180.

14 Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Tschan, p. 207.

15 Else Nordahl, *Templum quod Ubsola dicitur . . . i arkeologisk belysning* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1996).

16 *Scholium* 138 (134), in Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Tschan, p. 207.

17 Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'The material culture of Old Norse religion', in *The Viking World*, ed. Brink and Price, pp. 249–56; Gunnar Andersson,

‘Among trees, bones, and stones: the sacred grove at Lunda’, in *Old Norse Religion in Long Term Perspectives*, ed. Andrén *et al*., pp. 195–99.

18 Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Tschan, pp. 207–08.

19 Translated by James E. Montgomery, ‘Ibn Fadlan and the Rūsiyyah’, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), 1–25 (pp. 15–17).

20 Montgomery, ‘Ibn Fadlan and the Rūsiyyah’, pp. 17–18.

21 F.-A. Stylegar, ‘The Kaupang cemeteries revisited’, in *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, ed. D. Skre (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), pp. 65–101.

22 *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 8, in *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, pp. 11–12.

23 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 34.

24 *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 9, in *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 13.

25 *Gautreks saga*, ch. 7, in *Seven Viking Romances*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 157.

26 *Hávamál*, Stanza 139, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 34.

Chapter 3: Myths in the Viking Age

1 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 73.

2 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 89.

3 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 59–61.

4 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 7–8.

5 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 120.

6 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 132.

7 This discussion is based upon the edition and translation of Richard North, *The Haustlöng of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1997), although I do not follow all of North’s (sometimes controversial) arguments here.

8 *Ynglingatal* 3, in *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 17.

9 *Ynglingatal* 7, in *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 20.

10 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 27.

11 *Ynglingatal* 5, in *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 19.

12 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 19.

13 *Hrafnsmál* 6, in *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, ed. and trans. Nora Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 83.

14 *Grímnismál* 14, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 53.

15 This and the following stanzas of *Eiríksmál* are translated from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldediktning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912–15), B1, 165–66.

16 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 106.

17 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 107.

18 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 110.

19 *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Alison Finlay (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 66.

20 *Hákonarmál* 12. This and subsequent references to *Hákonarmál* are translated from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldediktning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, B1, 57–60.

21 *Hákonarmál* 18, which is found in *Heimskringla* but not in *Fagrskinna*.

22 *Hávamál* 76–77, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 24.

23 *Grímnismál* 8–9, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 53.

24 *Gylfaginning*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 32–34.

25 For a translation of *Höfuðlausn*, see *Egils saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder, in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Viking, 2000), pp. 114–18.

26 *Arinbjarnarkviða* 20, in *Egils saga*, trans. Scudder, p. 163.

27 *Arinbjarnarkviða* 6, in *Egils saga*, trans. Scudder, p. 160.

28 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 61–64.

29 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 28.

30 *Hávamál* 105–06, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 28.

31 For a full text of *Sonatorrek*, see *Egils saga*, trans. Scudder, pp. 152–65, upon which these translations are based.

32 *Skáldskaparmál*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 95.

33 *Egils saga*, trans. Scudder, pp. 80–81.

Chapter 4: The Twilight of the Gods

1 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 131.

2 *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, pp. 76–77.

3 *Gráfeldardrápa* 1, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 70. This verse is only found in *Skáldskaparmál*.

4 *Gráfeldardrápa* 6, in *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 83.

5 *Gráfeldardrápa* 12, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 67.

6 *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 80.

7 *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 76.

8 *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, pp. 86–87.

9 *Drápa about Jarl Hákon* 1, in *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 87.

10 *Vellekla* 16, in *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 86.

11 *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 93.

12 *Háleygjatal* 1, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 71. *Skáldskaparmál* has a second half-stanza (p. 69) that mentions the mead of poetry as ‘that which the speedy one bore from Surtr’s deep dales’. It is not clear whether this clause belongs to the first stanza of *Háleygjatal* or if it should remain separate. The stanza numbering that I follow here reflects the order found in the new edition of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*.

13 Translated by Russell Poole, ‘Myth and ritual in the *Háleygjatal* of Eyvindr skáldaspillir’, in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. Quinn *et al*., pp. 153–76, p. 162. In Poole’s arrangement of the poem, this verse appears as two separate stanzas, numbered 3 and 4.

14 *Hávamál* 156, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 36.

15 Poole, ‘Myth and ritual in the *Háleygjatal* of Eyvindr skáldaspillir’, pp. 173–74.

16 *Vellekla* 32, in E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), p. 63.

17 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, p. 187.

18 Taken from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 67 and 90–91.

19 *Háleygjatal* 15, in *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay, p. 94.

20 Roberta Frank, ‘The lay of the land in Skaldic praise poetry’, in *Myth in Early North West Europe*, ed. Stephen Glosecki (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), pp. 175–95.

21 This reference is found in the Icelandic manuscript compilation known as *Flateyjarbók* (written between 1387 and about 1394).

22 Translated by John McKinnell, ‘Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr and *Hyndluljóð*’, in *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz 1922–1997*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann (Vienna: Fassbänder, 2002), pp. 265–90, at p. 281.

23 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 112.

24 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 254.

25 McKinnell, ‘Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr and *Hyndluljóð*’, pp. 272–79.

26 *Lokasenna* 30, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 90.

27 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 61.

28 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 71.

29 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 126.

30 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 83–86. When I mention *Þórsdrápa* by stanza, it is to the sequence of verses as they are preserved in *Snorra Edda* that I refer.

31 Roberta Frank, ‘Hand tools and power tools in Eilífr’s *Þórsdrápa*’, in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow *et al*. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 94–109.

32 *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, ed. R. Keyser and C. R. Unger (Christiania: Feilberg and Landmark, 1851), p. 93.

33 Frank, ‘Hand tools and power tools’, p. 104.

34 *Völuspá* is found in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, pp. 4–13. Although I have been guided by Larrington’s translation, I have sometimes departed from her readings here.

35 *Hyndluljóð* 44 in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 259.

36 Helmut de Boor, ‘Die religiöse Sprache der Völuspá und verwandter Denkmäler’, in *Deutsche Islandforschung 1930*, vol. 1 *Kultur*, ed. W. H. Vogt (Breslau: Hirt, 1930), pp. 68–142.

Chapter 5: Pagan Myths under Conversion

1 *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander, pp. 192–93.

2 Translated from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 3 volumes (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1958–2000), I, 347–48. A (sometimes unreliable) translation of *Óláfs saga* is available as *The Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason Who Reigned Over Norway* AD *995 to* AD *1000*, trans. J. Sephton (London: Nutt, 1895).

3 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, I, 387.

4 This and the rest of Hallfreðr's 'conversion verses' are translated by Russell Poole, 'The "Conversion Verses" of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld', *Maal og Minne* 2002, pp. 15–37.

5 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, II, 168.

6 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, II, 313.

7 *Húsdrápa* 1, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 71.

8 *Húsdrápa* 2, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 77.

9 *Húsdrápa* 7–11, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 67–68, 75 and 121.

10 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 49.

11 *Kristni saga*, in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), p. 42.

12 *Kristni saga*, in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga*, trans. Grønlie, p. 42.

13 *Íslendingabók*, in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga*, trans. Grønlie, p. 9.

Chapter 6: The Rebirth of Norse Mythology

1 Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1999), pp. 288–93.

2 *Øxarflokkr* 1–5, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 98–99.

3 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 29–30.

4 *Krákumál* 25 and 29, translated from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldediktning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, B1, 655–56.

5 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 22.
6 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 25.
7 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 69.
8 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 70.
9 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 72.
10 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 72.
11 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 76.
12 Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Fisher, I, 78.
13 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 4.
14 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 1.
15 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, pp. 8–9.
16 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 11.
17 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 57.
18 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 57.
19 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 49.
20 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 51.
21 *Málsháttakvæði* 9, translated from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldediktning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, B2, 140.
22 Bugge, *The Home of the Eddic Poems with Especial Reference to the Helgi-Lays*, trans. William Henry Schofield (London: Nutt, 1899). This is a revised translation of the 1893 Danish original.
23 Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), pp. 55–56.
24 *Grímnismál* 1–3, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 52.
25 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 63.
26 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 84.

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